The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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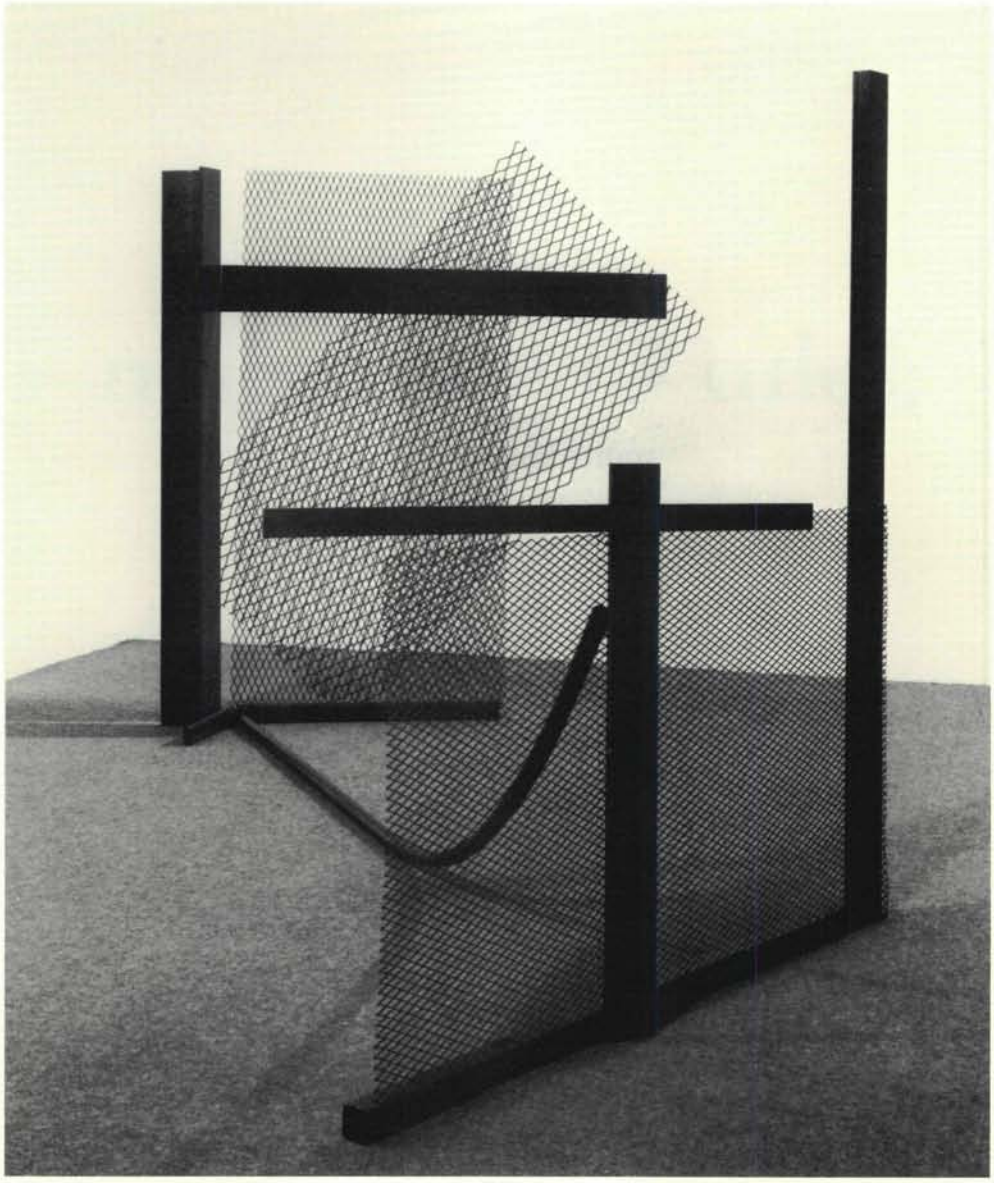

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(Detail) George Bellows, Tennis (Tennis Tournament), lithograph, signed, titled, and numbered in pencil, c. 1921, 18¼ x 20⅛ in.

CHRISTIE'S

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Waiting for Kynaston: an art chronicle

by Hilton Kramer

Some time in the month of May—barring, of course, yet another postponement—the Museum of Modern Art will reopen its doors and give us a first glimpse of what our "new" MoMA is going to look like for the remaining years of the twentieth century. The museum has been closed to the public since January. For a longer time than that—since the "old" museum on West Fifty-third Street was pretty much shut down in 1980—it has survived as little more than a shadow of its former existence. Its great collections have been out on loan to other institutions or else locked up in storage, and its program of exhibitions devoted to contemporary art has been radically curtailed. For the youngest generation of artists, therefore, MoMA has been more a myth than a reality, and a significant segment of the art public, too, has come of age with little first-hand knowledge of the museum's collections or of the role they have played in shaping our understanding of modern art.

No one doubts that MoMA is going to regain an important place on the art scene once its operations are restored to a full schedule. Its collections, after all, are unrivaled in both quality and number, and if the advance publicity is to be believed, the new MoMA will have a lot more space in which to keep them on permanent exhibition. Yet it is also true that the art scene had already begun to change and expand, even before the shutdown on West Fifty-third Street, in ways that challenged the museum's former ascendancy, and the momentum of these changes has greatly accelerated while MoMA has been mainly occupied with its internal problems and future plans. As far as major exhibitions of modern art are concerned, the time has long since passed when MoMA's were the only shows in town; and as far as definitive exhibitions of new art are concerned, the center of gravity has unquestionably shifted to its rival institutions—not only in New York, but elsewhere both in this country and abroad.

The new MoMA will thus have a lot of catching up to do if it is going to recover anything like its former position of leadership, and not only in the area of painting and sculpture. The recent design show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art[1] has already served notice that MoMA can no longer expect to dominate another field in which it long enjoyed a virtual monopoly. In photography, too, the momentum—not only in mounting major exhibitions of the classic figures and in evaluating new talent and new trends but also in setting (or abandoning) coherent standards—is now clearly elsewhere. As for architecture, much will depend on the quality of the museum's new building. If that should turn out to be a clinker, then it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the museum to regain the voice of authority

1 For a review of this exhibition, "Design Since 1945," see William H. Jordy's article in the January issue of *The New Criterion*.

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with which it once issued its pronouncements in this field. Even beyond that consideration, however, the current debate in architecture over the runaway vogue of postmodernism is not one in which MoMA has been heard to speak with clarity or cogency. The same holds true for film. The museum will always be a pleasant place in which to see old movies, but when was the last time anyone looked to MoMA for ideas or standards or revelations in this field? Or, for that matter, in any field of current endeavor?

All of which is very sad, for what many serious people are seeking in the arts today is some sense of intellectual conviction and leadership, the clear articulation of a standard of quality rigorously independent of both commercial and ideological hype, and if it is not the function of an institution like MoMA to provide it, then the very reason for its existence must be regarded as problematic. More space, more blockbuster-scale exhibitions, bigger catalogues and expanded sales rooms, longer lines at the box office, and floods of fancy publicity—all of which can confidently be expected from MoMA in the near future—will not avail if there is no serious critical *thought* at the center of the museum's myriad activities. Yet if any provision has been made to meet that need in the museum's future, it has certainly been kept a secret.

What isn't a secret, however—or not entirely a secret, anyway—is the exhibition which the museum is counting on to recoup its authority in the field of contemporary art. This is the ambitious (at least in scale) "International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture," which the curator Kynaston McShine is organizing as one of the major events inaugurating the museum's new building. (Assuming that the new building will open, as planned, around the middle of May, this exhibition is scheduled to remain on view through the month of August.) Few outsiders are in a position to know exactly what Mr. McShine has selected for this mammoth survey. It seems safe to assume that the international brotherhood of Neo-Expressionist painters will not be overlooked, but beyond that there are few certainties. Yet despite this lack of hard information (or—who knows?—because of it) the growing suspense and anxiety prompted by this event—most particularly the question of who is in and who is not, and what role the new generation of dealers and collectors is likely to play in determining the final selection—has for some time now taken on the character of an offstage, Beckett-like drama that might appropriately be dubbed, "Waiting for Kynaston." It is this drama, rather than what has actually been exhibited in the galleries, which can truly be said to be the dominant (albeit offstage) event of the current art season. By now, I suppose, all the decisions are made. About a month ago the phones began ringing in various dealers' offices and artists' studios with the good (or bad) news. The catalogue must now be in production, and the paintings and sculptures slated to arrive for installation. Whether the exhibition itself will succeed in allaying the Beckettian anxieties which have surrounded this event from the outset, or only in adding another layer of absurdity to the situation, remains to be seen. Mr. McShine is a curator who says little and writes nothing. Like Godot's, his intentions can only be inferred on the basis of ambiguous evidence, and are therefore unlikely to be fully known even when the exhibition is finally revealed to us.

Meanwhile, it is a sign of the times that major exhibitions of the kind which it was once the exclusive prerogative of MoMA to initiate have this season been seen elsewhere in New York. As it happens, two of these exhibitions—the Balthus retrospective, which has just opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,[2] and the Willem de Kooning retrospective, which has just closed at the Whitney Museum of American Art—are devoted to subjects which MoMA has already given its attention to. But the Balthus show

2 The Balthus retrospective opened at the Metropolitan Museum on February 29, and remains on view through May 13.

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which the late James Thrall Soby organized at the Modern took place as long ago as 1956, and it was clearly time for another, more comprehensive look at this strangely elusive figure. Not only has Balthus produced a great deal of new work in the interim, but the artistic context in which it will now be seen is very different from what it was in 1956, in the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. Balthus was then an artist unknown in New York, whereas today he is the object of an international cult, and it will be interesting to see how well the work holds up in an artistic environment far more favorable to the kind of representational painting he has always practiced. (The Balthus exhibition will be discussed in a future issue of *The New Criterion.*[3]) MoMA's de Kooning retrospective took place more recently, in 1968, and the reason for mounting yet another retrospective has more to do, in this case, with the quality of the artist's reputation than with the quality of the work he has produced since the late Sixties. De Kooning is, of course, widely regarded as a living master—which, in my view, is a woefully mistaken judgment. Before going into that, however, let us first consider a more important event—the Kandinsky show at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.[4]

This was devoted to Kandinsky's "Russian and Bauhaus Years," the period from 1915 to 1933, and was thus the second in the series of three exhibitions which the Guggenheim has planned as a comprehensive survey of the artist upon whose work (and spirit) the museum itself was founded in the 1930s. (The first exhibition, "Kandinsky in Munich," took place in 1982; the third, covering the artist's Paris period, is scheduled for 1985.) This second installment on the "Russian and Bauhaus Years" was organized by Clark V. Poling, who also wrote the superb, book-length catalogue accompanying the exhibition. It was hardly to be expected that either the exhibition or its catalogue would bring us much in the way of fresh revelations, for Kandinsky's is an oeuvre we feel we know (thanks largely to the Guggenheim's many earlier efforts on the artist's behalf), and both the Russian avant-garde and the Bauhaus—which form part of the subject of this exhibition—have likewise been lavished with much attention in recent years. Yet everything about this exhibition was freshly considered, and one was often made to feel, even with pictures one thought one knew well, that one was studying these objects for the first time—mainly, I think, because so much serious thought (and research) had gone into tracing their individual development and relating it not only to Kandinsky's artistic growth in this period but also to the intense and fructifying intellectual atmosphere in which he worked.

Contextual exhibitions, in which attempts are made to establish vital connections between an artist's work and the social and cultural history of his period, are all too often pretty shoddy affairs, full of question-begging assumptions and unacknowledged ideological agendas that have little or nothing to do with the work in question. The Guggenheim's own "Kandinsky in Munich" exhibition was by no means exempt from this criticism: one of the essays included in the catalogue of that show—a fantasia on the theme of "Munich as Cultural Center: Politics and the Arts"—was a perfect example of the way such attempts can go completely wrong. It was one of the great merits of Dr. Poling's exhibition and catalogue that they redeemed this use of a contextual perspective by keeping if firmly focused on the development of Kandinsky's *art,* and our understanding of this art was greatly enhanced as a result. Much else was brought into consideration, of course—including Kandinsky's personal plight in navigating

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3 For a biographical account of Balthus, see James Lord's "Balthus: The Curious Case of the Count de Rola" in the December, 1983, issue of *The New Criterion.*

4 "Kandinsky: Russian and Bauhaus Years" was exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum from December 9, 1983, to February 12. It will be seen at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia, from March 15 to April 29.

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the treacherous political shoals of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the Weimar Republic. Yet neither in the exhibition, which included everything from examples of Russian avant-garde painting to furniture and classroom exercises from the Bauhaus, nor in the catalogue, which scrupulously traces the theoretical, pedagogical, and political developments of this period, did one encounter anything that led one *away* from the artist and his work. Wherever one turned, the animating spirit of the work was directly amplified.

Kandinsky emerges from this survey as a far more interesting and complex figure than he was heretofore thought to be. I must confess that I, at least, had always thought of Kandinsky in this period as a codifier rather than as an initiator of artistic ideas, and this exhibition has done much to change my mind about that. It is true that the great pioneering work he did in creating his first abstract paintings in Germany was already behind him when the onset of the First World War forced him to return to his native Russia. Yet I realize now that I hadn't quite appreciated the degree to which the invention of abstraction marked, for Kandinsky, only the rude beginning of an artistic and spiritual quest that might very well have been abruptly terminated by political events if he had not been so determined to see the matter through. In Russia, in the turmoil of the Revolution and the cultural upheaval it brought in its wake, and at the Bauhaus, where he was at once a committed teacher, an eager participant, and a spiritual exile, Kandinsky was both an insider and an outsider—acutely responsive to the ferment of artistic ideas he found useful to his own aesthetic purposes, yet largely aloof from the social purposes they were intended (by others) to serve. An artist who participates so energetically and even creatively in group endeavors, to the point of becoming intricately involved in their history and owing a good deal to their ideas, and yet keeps his inner spirit so completely free of distraction and entanglement in order to pursue the intellectual purity of his own aesthetic interests, is not an easy figure to write (or think) about with clarity and precision. We are therefore all in Dr. Poling's debt for giving us our first really persuasive and detailed account of Kandinsky in this period. For this and other reasons, his catalogue essay must henceforth be considered an indispensable contribution to, among much else, the history of abstract art.[5]

It was in this period that Kandinsky abandoned Expressionism as the stylistic foundation of abstraction in favor of a more Constructivist idiom—no doubt in response to the work of the Russian modernists he now came into contact with for the first time. The changes which occurred in his painting during his Russian period parallel similar changes taking place at that very moment at the Bauhaus—which was one reason why Gropius accorded him such an enthusiastic welcome to its teaching staff. What is important to note about this historic shift is that it involved something more than a simple shift of "style." Kandinsky's painting was always firmly based on a philosophical attitude; he was scarcely able to apply his brush to the canvas without having his "ideas" clearly formulated in advance. Painting was for him a kind of dialogue between the visible and the invisible, and it was precisely *ideas* which served as an essential bridge linking metaphysical speculation, on the one hand, and the material realization of painting, on the other. And whereas in the initial stages of abstraction, in the years prior to 1915, the ideas in question were mainly derived from the occult—from the doctrines of theosophy—beginning in his Russian period and rapidly developing during the Bauhaus years, this interest in the occult was not so much abandoned as subsumed in theories of a utopian social order. Kandinsky was never much of a social thinker, however. His interest in utopian ideology was fundamentally metaphysical and mystical—and it was for this reason, I think, that he was able to

5 *Kandinsky: Russian and Bauhaus Years,* published by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (paperback, $19.50).

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function so well in the Bauhaus program and yet remain a completely independent spirit. When he left Germany for Paris in 1933, he had no need to revise or reconstruct his artistic thought, for he had never abandoned the spiritual basis of his art.

To turn from this momentous chapter in the history of abstraction to the de Kooning retrospective at the Whitney[6]—actually two retrospectives: one devoted to paintings and sculptures, and the other to drawings—is not, frankly, a rewarding task. De Kooning may not be the most overrated painter on the current art scene—the competition, after all, is fierce—but he must certainly be regarded as the most overrated artist of his own generation. This latest retrospective, like all of the artist's recent exhibitions, was largely a shambles, full of empty gestures, vacuous feeling, and dead ideas. Even in the drawing retrospective, which (at least in work from the earlier years) is far stronger than the painting and sculpture exhibition, we were made witness to a steady course of disintegration that was frightful to observe. As a painter, de Kooning had five good years —1946 to 1950—and it was in this period that he produced the only work likely to remain of permanent interest.

It will take a while, I suppose, for the artist's reputation to catch up with the reality of the oeuvre on which it is ostensibly based, but I have the impression that a change in this respect has already occurred. Even the more favorable press notices of the Whitney shows had a certain air of defensiveness and bad faith about them, and the press notices were by no means wholly favorable. For the first time a major showing of de Kooning's art was obliged to make its way in the world unaccompanied by the fanfares and bugle calls which for years had been carefully orchestrated by that Praetorian Guard of critics—Harold Rosenberg, Thomas B. Hess, and Fairfield Porter—for whom de Kooning was not simply a painter but a kind of cultural deity. Even though there was no shortage of volunteers to take up the instruments and blow on them as hard as they could, the result was unconvincing. At the Whitney, the emperor looked pretty naked. I know of several artists who left these retrospectives feeling absolutely shattered at what they found in them. No doubt it will take another generation before such feelings are translated into a revised account of exactly where de Kooning fits into the achievements of the New York School—and of modern painting as a whole —but it will come, and the place accorded him will be a modest one.

It will be interesting, in this connection, to see what place is accorded his work in the reinstallation of MoMA's permanent collection. It may be there, in the space given to de Kooning in relation to his contemporaries, that we may see the first immediate sign of the revisionist history to come.

6 After its showing at the Whitney Museum (December 15-February 26), the de Kooning retrospective travels to the Akademie der Künste, Berlin (March 11-April 29), and the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (June 26-September 24).

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Opera 1984: dead or alive?

by Samuel Lipman

The situation of opera at this time is interesting for more than the light it throws on the usual concerns of composers, performers, and audience. Precisely because opera unites music and words, because for its conception and staging it draws upon so many different arts and crafts, because it possesses such a rich repertory of acknowledged masterpieces, and (last but hardly least) because it is so expensive to put on, what is now happening in opera—and what has been happening for the past generation—is a reflection of the place of art in our culture as a whole.

The chief presenting symptom of opera today is easy to see: at a time of larger audiences, more performances, and escalating budgets, there aren't any widely successful new works. This fact is no less apparent to opera administrators than it is to audiences. As a result the repertory has become increasingly constricted, marked everywhere by a reliance on staple crowd-pleasers and—in the most daring opera houses—on an occasional novelty put on a few times and then almost always thrown away.

Just how widespread this backward-facing phenomenon is has been made abundantly clear in *Profile: 1983,* a smartly produced booklet put out by OPERA America, a national support and advocacy organization whose roster includes fifty-eight "member companies" and twenty-nine smaller "correspondent companies." There are two important sets of statistics in *Profile: 1983.* The first documents the repertory of the 1981-82 season, the second that of the 1983-84 season.

During 1981-82, OPERA America companies presented one hundred forty-six different fully-staged works performed with orchestra. Of these, seventy-four were written before 1900, and seventy-two were from the present century. But more important than a chronological list of individual works is the nature of the works themselves and the frequency with which they were produced. And here there is no comfort for the friends of a living operatic culture. Of the twelve most frequently produced works in 1981-82 —with *Die Fledermaus* at the top of the list and *Tales of Hoffmann* at the bottom—only *Madame Butterfly* (1904) comes from the twentieth century. A quick calculation suggests that the mean year of composition of these twelve operas was 1849.

Matters are no better if we consider the frequency of *performances* rather than *productions.* The most frequently performed work in 1981-82 was *Rigoletto* (1851). Of the forty-seven works receiving at least ten performances, thirteen were indeed written in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, *six* of them are by Puccini: *Madame Butterfly* (1904), *Tosca* (1900), *Turandot* (completed in 1926, after Puccini's death), and the three short operas of *Il Trittico* (1918), *Il Tabarro, Gianni Schicchi,* and *Suor Angelica.* The "contemporaneity" of the list of thirteen is further undermined by the inclusion on it of *The Merry Widow* (1905) and *The*

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Song of Norway (1944), a badly dated pastiche of Grieg's now almost century-old hits. Of the thirteen, only two—Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* (1951) and Blitzstein's *Regina* (1949)—were written after World War II. The mean year of composition of these successful twentieth-century works is 1923.

Six operatic world premieres took place in the 1981-82 season under the sponsorship of OPERA America companies. All these works were written by Americans: they include Robert Ward's *Abelard and Heloise* and *Minutes Till Midnight,* Edward Barnes's *Feathertop* and Henry Mollicone's *The Mask of Evil* (both in one act), George Rochberg's *The Confidence Man,* and Stephen Paulus's *The Postman Always Rings Twice.* Of these six, only the Paulus work has so far received more than local exposure, a circumstance owing to its having been performed at the 1983 Edinburgh Festival by the Opera Theatre of St. Louis, the company which commissioned it. The rest seem already to have moved into their composers' musical bibliographies, to emerge only when new reference works are being written.

Among the membership of OPERA America, there were no companies producing 1981-82 premieres of new works by non-Americans. Instead, six older works—by Haydn (1782), Rossini (1819), Verdi (1848), Prokofiev (1911-13), Tigranian (1912), and Zandonai (1912)—received first performances here. The mean year of composition of these works is 1864.

Profile: 1983 does not give any information on 1982-83 repertory. It does, however, give listings of the 1983-84 production schedule of each of its members. If the news coming out of the 1981-82 season was bad for the cause of contemporary opera, that coming from the present season can only be called dismal. The lists supplied by United States constituent companies of OPERA America (there are several Canadian companies in the organization, as well as a South American company) show that out of two hundred sixty-three presentations, two hundred twenty-two are of works written before (and the vast majority well before) 1930. Only fifteen are works written by non-Americans after 1930; of these, five presentations are of mainstream works by Benjamin Britten. There are twenty-six works by Americans listed in the current season's repertory. Sadly enough, eleven are Broadway musicals and seven are the most popular works of Menotti. There are no premieres of any significance.

Nowhere is the constriction of repertory more marked than with our very largest opera companies. There are in this country four of these behemoth enterprises: the Metropolitan Opera, the New York City Opera, the Chicago Lyric Opera, and the San Francisco Opera. The Metropolitan, not having performed an American opera since the 1960s, continued to uphold its tradition this year; the entire contribution of this great house to the performance of true twentieth-century repertory consists of Britten's *Peter Grimes* and *Billy Budd,* Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites,* Weill's *Mahagonny,* and Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol* and *Oedipus Rex,* the last not even an opera but rather a semi-staged oratorio. The New York City Opera, long the hope of a native American opera, is doing (out of nineteen productions) two American works: Bernstein's *Candide* and Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*; of non-American works written after 1930, the City Opera is doing none. The Chicago Lyric Opera is presenting only Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth.* San Francisco, like Chicago risking no American works, is doing (out of fourteen productions) just one contemporary work: Tippett's *Midsummer Night's Marriage.*

Clearly, something is wrong in the world of opera. At a time when there is new literature, new poetry, new visual art, new dance, and even (mostly wanly received, it is true) new music, there just isn't much new opera to be seen. Sandwiched in among *Profile: 1983*'s obligatory upbeat descriptions of its own history, organization, staff, programs, and publications is a description of the problem and a suggestion concerning its true cause:

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> There is a move toward greater conservatism in programming: so far, only two companies have announced plans for world premieres or American premieres of new works for the 1983-84 season. This compares to 12 premiere productions in both 1981-82 and 1982-83. Companies want to do more American works, but reduced support from government sources has forced them to look more toward earned income to balance their budgets. This means that repertory selection becomes more a matter of choosing works that will guarantee success at the box office—the more familiar, traditional repertoire.

On its face, blaming the problems of the operatic repertory on a shortfall of public funding would seem difficult to sustain. By the evidence contained in *Profile: 1983* itself, recent decreases in public support have been minor and have been largely compensated for by increases in earned and unearned private income. But to say this is hardly to deny the sizable role public funding does play in artistic life. For enthusiastic testimonials to the magnitude of this influence one need do no more than consult its proponents. One of the most respected of these is Schuyler Chapin, Dean of the School of the Arts at Columbia University and Chairman of the American Symphony Orchestra League, OPERA America's counterpart in the orchestra field. Testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on Education, the Arts, and Humanities on November 17, 1983, Chapin was unstinting in his praise:

> The Endowment has given what I would almost term a new lease on life to the vitality of the arts in this country. There is no question that, on balance, the artistic life of this country has never been stronger, and in my view, the reason for that strength is largely due to the impetus given to the arts by the involvements of the Endowment . . . .
>
> The fact that we have taken a positive position, that the Endowments are in place and working, is probably the single most important thing that has happened to the artistic community in our lifetime.

Concern for opera has been manifest at the National Endowment for the Arts since its inception in 1965. Though funding at first was small—$50,000 in 1966—yearly increases enabled the federal opera budget to reach a million and a half dollars in 1972, to top three million in 1974 (though it dropped to two million the next year), and to go well over six million in 1981. Reagan administration cuts, only partially allowed by Congress, resulted in a reduction of approximately ten percent for both 1982 and 1983. The 1983 expenditure by the NEA for opera was $5,052,000.

Though I have used the word opera to describe the purpose of this federal funding, the program under which opera is now funded is not in fact called "Opera"; it is called "Opera-Musical Theater." Indeed, the process by which the "Opera" of 1966 has become the "Opera-Musical Theater" of 1984 reveals a good deal about official attitudes toward opera and helps explain how opera has reached its present state.

At the beginning the problems seemed relatively simple and the solutions fairly obvious. The first federal initiatives were not unreasonably directed toward the development of regional companies and the expansion of touring. In 1969 the NEA assisted private sources in the establishment of the National Opera Institute, an organization devoted to encouraging apprentice singers, commissioning new works, assisting in the production of new and rarely staged works, and expanding the opera audience.

But it was not enough just to *support* opera. In the words of Janet Brenner's recent official history of the program, "a general concern still remained for the status of opera in the larger American culture, a concern that included raising the awareness of the average American." Toward this end, in 1970, the NEA funded the creation of OPERA America to act as "a single, unified voice for the professional opera companies of the United States."

At this point, two considerations—one new, one old—began to alter the way in which the public funding of opera was to be

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approached. First, operatic activity in the country as a whole increased dramatically and with it the public's attention. The fresh perception of opera's importance seemed to require giving opera an autonomous status in the Endowment's structure, so that it could receive treatment equal to that of music, dance, theater, and the visual arts. Second, there remained the old and lurking problem of the right of musical theater—which had at least historically found its home on Broadway—to government encouragement and financial support. A conflict-ridden discussion of the very nature of opera ensued.

To appreciate the importance of this discussion, it is necessary first to understand how opera has traditionally been understood. On the most simple view, opera is words set to music and staged. Unfortunately, such a definition is broad enough to include as well Broadway musicals and the rock video clips now so common on television. But reality counts in the process of definition too. To the art public, opera is the kind of composition that has traditionally been done in the great opera houses of the world. Indeed, despite our own tendency in America to see opera as composed of both "grand opera" and "light opera," for the cultivated American audience, just as for its counterpart in Europe, opera means the great body of work from Gluck to Puccini and Strauss. It can also include, for a relatively small part of the sophisticated public, works as recent as those of Berg and Schoenberg, Hindemith and Stravinsky, and Shostakovich and Britten. But whatever the exact limits of what is allowed, opera remains an elite art form, European and in some sense romantic in origin, belonging in large measure to the domain of high culture, and recalling the past rather than mirroring contemporary daily life.

There is, of course, a common element of greatness contained in this working definition of opera. The audience is quite aware that the works they love are often marked by absurd plots, pasteboard characters, graceless librettos, and creaky dramatic action. What is common to great opera is great music—distinguished, memorable, and widely seen as belonging to the European classical tradition. Whether the operas in question are by Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, or Strauss, they need not be seen to be experienced; they need only be heard. Neither of the two most important vehicles by which the gospel of opera has been propagated in this country—phonograph records and the weekly Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts—involves visual elements.

All of this, of course, had been known long before opera's new prominence in official American cultural life. But a large-scale program of support for opera could hardly be content with the premise that opera was based upon a European classical music that didn't seem to be written anymore—even in Europe. So if opera was to receive the injection of public funds worthy of the social distinction and the public-relations talents of its boosters some way had to be found to domesticate opera, to make it seem not just an adornment to American life but a reflection of the American ethos. At the same time, moreover, a way had to be found to recognize, through support, the Broadway musical theater, America's only claim to an indigenous opera-like art.

The push for opera's autonomy, resisted by the leadership of the NEA Music Program, came from the representatives of the operatic field. Just how these advocates of opera saw the problem is clear from an official 1976 recommendation of the opera section of the NEA Music Advisory Panel, as quoted in the Brenner history:

> Opera, like ballet, is a hybrid form. It is at least as much "theater" as it is "music." As such, it should not be treated as a "pure music" form within other "pure music" forms.
>
> The opera industry is a fast-developing and diverse one, and administering to its special needs would be better accomplished by a separate program structure. The art form has recently begun to attract larger audiences and experience considerable growth via the influx of talented management into the field and via

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> the evolving of a more valid, healthy artistic policy characterized by the use of American artists in highly theatrical productions, the performance of more American works including the best of American musical theater, and the touring of productions to areas having no professional company.
>
> Separate program status, with the accompanying staff attention could encourage this development at a key point in the industry's—and art form's—development.
>
> It is envisioned that this program would (could) eventually provide support for high-quality projects in the area of American musical theater, which is fast earning its deserved "art form" status.

By 1978, the internal redefinition of opera to de-emphasize musical elements seemed complete. In January of that year, Ann Farris Darling, the executive director of OPERA America (and now the director of the Opera-Music Theater Program at the NEA) prepared a "Summary-Rationale" to answer doubts about the proposed marriage of opera and musical theater. In answer to the question "What is Opera?" she managed to avoid even a single use of the word "music":

> Opera is:
> 1) a performing art discipline utilizing literature with voice, orchestra, drama, dance, visual arts, etc.;
> 2) an expression and artistic exploration of human life, action, values, emotion and thought;
> 3) an art form that is being complemented by American composers, artists, and producers to embrace the American scene, both in its historical and its contemporary aspects.

Why were spokesmen for opera as traditionally understood so ready to go along with an expansion of their mission that harbored so much potential for artistic dilution and jurisdictional strife? Janet Brenner's account of a 1977 OPERA America board meeting offers some clues. Among other things, it shows the curious mixture of opportunism and self-delusion with which artists and administrators go about cutting off the limb on which they sit:

> During the open session of this OPERA America meeting, the autonomy issue for Opera/Music Theater was addressed. Although none of the musical theater representatives invited were able to attend, Opera panelists, Music panelists, Endowment Budget Director, and many OPERA America members and outside advisors participated.
>
> Several crucial issues and questions were raised during this meeting. An example—whether the inclusion of musical theater in the proposed program might possibly give opera a greater funding leverage. Additionally, it was noted that several opera companies were attempting to help "Americanize" opera by producing musicals, but the exorbitant costs of mounting new, experimental, and/or innovative productions and attracting audiences for these works was an apparent concern.
>
> Alternatives were discussed, but the general consensus from this meeting revealed a strong support from the opera field to form a separate Opera program outside of the Music Program in order to secure appropriate staff, attention and money. It appeared that actual support to musicals was not a priority to these opera representatives. Nevertheless, there was some interest in musical theater as suggestions were raised to broaden the title of the proposed new Program to "Music Theater," but only funding opera until the Program allocation level increased.

As the forces of opera were attempting to get money in other people's names and use it for their own purposes, the proponents of musical theater were staking their claims for funding. A major role in this effort was played by at least two members of the National Council for the Arts, the advisory board of the NEA: Jean Dalrymple, an artists' representative, publicist, and theatrical producer who had at one time been director of the New York City Center Drama and Light Opera companies; and Harold Prince, the noted Broadway director. In a 1977 letter to an NEA Music Program official,

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Prince wrote, as quoted by Janet Brenner:

> . . . the musical . . . is being priced out on a Broadway level . . . . and for the first time in my experience . . . I see talented composers forced to move to California to write underscoring for movies.

Brenner explains further:

> Moreover, Broadway had met with the imminent decline of the "road" (touring). This, plus the unwillingness of many non-profit institutions to incorporate musicals into their repertory made even more difficult musical theater's case: to prove that it was, indeed, an integral component of America's culture and therefore was deserving of Endowment assistance.

In April of 1978 a joint meeting of opera and musical theater professionals was convened at the request of Harold Prince. The assembled experts included only one "classical" composer—Carlisle Floyd, the composer of *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men,* works which attempted to bridge the gap between the opera and the musical. Not surprisingly, the meeting came out in favor of the proposed marriage between the two musical forms. According to Brenner:

> During the first part of the meeting, the aesthetic and pragmatic compatibilities of opera and musical theater were explored. The consensus of the participants was that the quality of the work is the critical element and there did exist a definite continuum in performers, training, skills and repertoire between opera and musical theater . . . .
>
> Overall, the participants felt that for too long opera and musical theater had been relegated to separate worlds. These disciplines, they felt, could help each other and, therefore, their distinctions should not be perpetuated—instead, a philosophical and administrative consolidation should ensue.
>
> Suggestions as to the name of the new Program included "Lyric Theater," "Opera/Music Theater" and "Music Theater." The majority of the participants endorsed "Music Theater" for the appropriate title as they felt it most clearly described the makeup of the proposed Program. However, the opera representatives did not want to eliminate the name "opera" from the title. They explained that for years, the American opera companies worked hard to try and diminish the stigma associated with opera [and] thus "legitimize" it as a true American art form. Excluding "opera" on a national level would undermine what they had finally begun to achieve. The participants acquiesced in the title "Opera/Musical Theater" and concluded that the name was not the crucial issue as long as the public was aware of the Program and who it funds. The goal—a unified Program, of opera and musical theater, which would hopefully encourage some new perspectives and directions for the art form.

By May of 1978 the combined program was born.[1] The first guidelines represented a triumph for all except the silent adherents of a traditional idea of opera:

> The National Endowment for the Arts, through its Opera-Musical Theater Program, is committed to broadening the concept of musical theater in the nation and, in the process, to making all manifestations of this unique art form, created and produced at the highest artistic level, available and accessible to a wide and ever-expanding audience.
>
> Whether comic or serious, earthy or elevated, music theater, from the time it moved from the courts to the public arena almost two and a half centuries ago, has been part of a continuing tradition of people's art at its best, and has flourished most when it has been an integral part of the fabric of public life. The

1 Even the discussion over the new program's name represented the new and altered definition of opera. As reported by Brenner, "this new Program recommended that what had been a 'slash' in the program's name (Opera/Musical Theater), now be changed to 'dash' (Opera-Musical Theater), as they agreed this more closely reflected the content and concern of the New Program without a loss to opera's name and identity."

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> Opera-Musical Theater Program hopes to help eliminate, or at least reduce, the artificial barriers which have grown up in our society to separate the various forms of music theater, and to help create an atmosphere of mutual respect and appreciation which extends to artist and public alike.

It hardly seems possible to quarrel with the somewhat vapid goal of respect and appreciation for the artist and public, but one can only wonder about an artistic and intellectual sensibility that calls the choice between *Fidelio* and *Oklahoma!* a result of "artificial barriers." Here, in the work of our artistic leaders in Washington, was a perfect example of the 1970s melange of cultural blend and level.

The specific policies that the NEA has promulgated since then have gone far to put music in its place. Although it is true that the large and famous companies continue to receive large subsidies for their traditional activities, the truly innovative effort of the NEA has been put into the creation, development, and production of new works. Creation, in this context, does not mean giving composers money to write operas. Rather, it means assisting "institutions to commission creative artists such as composers, librettists and lyricists." Development means funding "laboratory or workshop productions of the new work." And production means helping "institutions with pre-opening costs such as for copying and for orchestrations." In the world of musicals, because that world has not yet been institutionalized, money has gone to "attract," in Brenner's words, "the individual producers who, in actuality, were the leading forces behind developing new musicals."

When, as a member, I first attended a meeting of the National Council on the Arts in February of last year, the first item of discussion in the opening public session was the guidelines for Opera-Musical Theater during the 1984 fiscal year. Much of the language for the guidelines had been borrowed from the previous version. But several new sentences had been added at the opening:

> In the United States, at the end of the twentieth century, we are witnessing a proliferation of many forms of music theater, both traditional and avant garde. The older forms of opera and operetta have been enriched by the work of composers, performers, and directors who are constantly expanding the boundaries of the art form with their own fresh vision and the new technology. Moreover, music theater in this country is shaped by a heritage which is unique and specifically American: the Broadway musical.

This upbeat language was consistent with various passages in the 1983 Opera-Musical Theater program review. The NEA "overview panel" posited thirty-five ideal outcomes for the discipline by 1990. They included such happy ideas as letting "opera take its place as the cutting edge of all art forms," encouraging a "new environment within music theater for the creative process and its audiences," allowing a "broader definition of opera and music theater," and seeking the "involvement of other creative artists not currently challenged by music theater to work within the art form."

It came as something of a shock, then, to read that the first point in the overview panel's subsequent list of current conditions in the field was contradictory, not only to the optimism being merchandised elsewhere but even within itself. The condition was stated as a "lack of high quality New American Works submitted to the Opera-Musical Theater Program, and the need for exposure and acceptance of contemporary works being written." Indeed, the pessimism of the opening half of this statement was amply confirmed by the two examples of current work shown, via video clips, to the Council. The first was a short section of a musical dealing with the moonings of a love-sick teenaged girl. This musical was being "workshopped" in a nonprofit environment in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The musical and dramatic puerility of this seemingly

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amateur confection was painful to behold. Nor were matters much better with the clip of the Houston Opera's premiere production of Carlisle Floyd's *Willie Stark*. This work, centering on a powerful incident in American history—the assassination of Huey Long—fails for basically one reason: its musically uncompelling and emptily conventional score. From the discussion that followed it was clear that the other examples of the new creation in music theater weren't much better. It all reminded me of the disaster suffered by the New York City Opera in 1980 when it made its last attempt (so far) to put on new American opera. This triple bill of derivative one-acters, weak on music but heavy on conceits, pleased neither operagoers nor musicians. Indeed, it seemed at times as if the works had been chosen for the purpose of giving the cause of native opera a black eye.

When the problems are seemingly insoluble, the committees of inquiry are many. In April of last year, little more than two months after the National Council on the Arts meeting in Washington, the National Opera Institute (in conjunction with the Theatre Communications Group, another government-sponsored service organization) devoted its sixth national colloquium to the subject of "New Alliances for Music Theater." The keynote speech was given by Harold Prince, the Institute's chairman. He began with the glad tidings that at its last board meeting the National Opera Institute had voted to change its name to the National Institute for Music Theater (with the name followed by the phrase "Supporting Opera and All Forms of American Musical Theater"). Prince made his concern clear at the outset:

> Many people think of opera houses as museums, but I believe that while we are all keepers of historic flame (whether we're doing opera or musicals), we also have to promulgate new work.

To the question of how this should be done, Prince advanced an answer consistent with his whole approach to the subject:

> . . . the same problem hit the non-Music Theater world decades ago, and the solution has been found in the two hundred resident professional theaters spread all over our country. From these theaters now come the new works which Broadway wants but has a hard time creating. The big boys with the big money come and see them and try to determine which one will work on Broadway. They guess right some of the time, and, happily enough, authors get to be richer because of it, and good things happen in the commercial arena for them. So the business becomes more attractive and viable for new talent, more able to compete with Hollywood and TV for the new talent. In just the same way we need thirty or forty organizations to solve the problem Music Theater now faces.

What Prince envisioned as coming out of this music theater was hardly the art form that is now a component of high culture. He had already made clear where his tastes lay:

> . . . to everyone's astonishment, opera companies are introducing the likes of SWEENEY TODD and CANDIDE into their repertoires. Audiences which five years ago would have denied any interest in this fare are quickly becoming excited by it and even inviting it. Now that's a terrific turnabout, but we will have to encourage it.

Given these marching orders, the group's proposals were preordained. Institutions were to be encouraged to "offer a broader repertoire including all forms of music theater" in large part by

> [setting] up regional workshops to share successful experiences, production techniques, and positive attitudes . . . ; [developing] peer pressure with emphasis on those opera and theater companies which have done well with a variety of Music Theater styles, e.g., Houston Grand Opera, which has produced large "standard repertoire" pieces as well as new,

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> often experimental works and Broadway musicals . . . ; [mounting] a national public relations effort to increase awareness of successful involvement in a wide variety of Music Theater production . . . ; [and involving] critics in open discussion to increase their awareness of the destructive efforts of premature reviews and reviews by individuals whose scope is limited (e.g., a non-musical theater critic or a non-theatrical music critic).

Yet another meeting to plan for artistic production in the Music Theater field, sponsored by OPERA America with support from the Rockefeller Foundation and the NEA, took place at the end of August in Detroit. Once again the suggested plan of action was to expand the notion of music theater and bring new players to the creative table. The goal was clearly a broadened, collaborative effort, with music reduced to its proper role:

> . . . the best approach to new works development [is] to start with new sources of up-front funding to encourage new forms of collaboration among creative people, as well as alternative processes for bringing new works into being . . . . [Recommended were] several alternative models describing how the various actors in the creative process could come together in the pre-commissioning and commissioning stages. In general . . . new arrangements [were favored] that involved a wide variety of creative artists in the very early stages of a new work's development, such as laboratories within opera companies, and other innovative workshop settings.
>
> . . . a central problem with new American works is their lack of strong dramatic element. To deal with this . . . several ways of encouraging greater interaction between theater and opera companies [were proposed, including specifically] a program of apprenticeships of composers with theater companies, and a parallel program to enable stage directors to work with opera companies.

One more meeting of inquiry—inquest might be a better term—was held, this time under the direct auspices of the NEA itself. The Opera-Musical Theater Seminar was held in Chicago on November 14 and 15 in a large room provided by the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Those in attendance included Anthony Bliss, the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, Ardis Krainik, the general director of the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and John Crosby, the founder and present general director of the Sante Fe Opera. Also attending was Kurt Herbert Adler, the distinguished conductor and general director emeritus of the San Francisco Opera. Three newer and smaller companies were represented as well: Richard Gaddes came from the Opera Theatre of St. Louis, David Gockley from the Houston Grand Opera, and Joan Harris from the Chicago Opera Theater. From the world of education, there was Robert Fitzpatrick, the president of the California Institute of the Arts, an institution founded with Walt Disney money but now closely associated with multi-media productions and the avant-garde. Three composers were in attendance: Conrad Susa, a theater-music specialist, and the successful Broadway writers Gary William Friedman and Micki Grant. The stage directors present were Tom O'Horgan, Rhoda Levine, and George Coates. From the theater, too, came playwright Megan Terry and designer John Conklin. Two vastly successful producers were there also: Joseph Papp, the head of the New York Shakespeare Festival, and Stuart Ostrow, the producer of such Broadway smash hits as *Pippin* and *1776*. Alan Eisenberg of Actors Equity and Gene Boucher of the American Guild of Musical Artists represented the performing unions. Timothy Nolen, who created the title role in Floyd's *Willie Stark*, spoke for singers, Paul Walter, a businessman and patron who is the chairman of the board of The Kitchen, spoke for patrons, and Nash Cox, the executive director of the Kentucky Arts Council, spoke for state arts agencies. Suzanne Weill, a senior vice president for programming, articulated the views of the Public Broadcasting System, and Jessie Woods, of the Chicago-based Urban

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Gateways, brought the message of arts education for the young. I attended in my capacity as a music critic. The meeting was chaired by Francis S. M. Hodsoll, the Chairman of the NEA, and was open to the press; excellent briefing material, including the Brenner history from which I have been quoting, was provided for the seminarians.

All the familiar issues and problems—the drought of new operatic works, the escalation of costs, the lack of enduring audience success for experimental pieces, the hope that joint efforts and audience tryouts might provide a substitute for artistic inspiration, the downgrading of music in favor of theater and drama—were articulated at the Chicago meeting, even to the point of boredom. What was surprising—at least to me—was the dissension among those assembled. It went far beyond the occasional misunderstandings and talking at cross-purposes common in any gathering of people intent on their individual tasks.

The order of the day in Chicago, in fact, was factional splits, kept controllable only by a general agreement that the irreducible condition for increased federal funding of any was the increased federal funding of all. The disagreement had to do with the very definition of the terms necessary to carry on the discussion. Whether these terms were opera or music theater, music or drama, tradition or innovation, establishment or avant-garde, art or craft, artist or audience, creator or producer, each speaker seemed to speak as a kind of frustrated monad, internally omnipotent and externally blocked.

There were, of course, some rough similarities among what might be thought of as the different camps represented. Those speaking for the traditionally oriented opera companies—Bliss of the Metropolitan, Krainik of Chicago, Crosby of Santa Fe—seemed above the discussion. Bliss seemed only to want to talk about boards of directors and how the Metropolitan gets its own directors to give large sums without interfering. Krainik made clear that the Lyric Opera had recovered under her stewardship from near bankruptcy only by following the safe policy of presenting internationally celebrated casts in accessible operas. Crosby talked little. Taken together, these purveyors of undoubted quality (and in the case of Santa Fe, a rare amount of innovation within the serious repertory) conveyed the message that they wanted nothing so much as to be left alone.

The composers present proclaimed themselves martyrs to an uncomprehending and even cynical artistic establishment whose work was at best irrelevant and at worst offensive. From the theater people at the meeting one heard a largely inchoate case for dramatic and production values. From Houston's David Gockley came the message that sopranos and conductors should not be allowed to run the show. Singer Timothy Nolen, speaking out of his experience with the Lake George Opera, said that the producer now can't trust the creator of a work to come out with a full-blown masterpiece. Alan Eisenberg spoke in the most cautious way about the limited help the performing unions might give to new works in their early stages of exposure. Stuart Ostrow seemed to speak for another era and another creative world when he lamented the absence today on Broadway—and everywhere else for that matter—of musical scores that "sing." Ostrow's remedy, one advanced by many others at the gathering for their own creative problems, was "workshopping," a process that gives collaborators, committees, and onlookers the possibility of adding to the creative outcome over a long period of artistic development. An observer with a more traditional idea of creative genius might wonder just how many zeroes it takes to add up to one. At the end of the meeting demands were heard for the NEA to require the presentation of new American works as a condition of its funding, as if the cause of an American art were best served by an enforced entitlement program.

Those who wished to make a case for the avant-garde—whatever they thought it to be—did so by a general attack on the old rather than by any description of the new. Indeed, the whole idea of tradition was

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under pressure from everyone except the three opera companies represented by Bliss, Krainik, and Crosby. When I remarked that the primary function of opera organizations was to preserve the treasures of civilization, I was answered by Joseph Papp (throughout the meeting the strongest advocate of the non-music and non-composer approach to music theater) with the rejoinder that the very notion of "treasures of civilization" could be nauseating. When I suggested that opera was now suffering from an unwillingness by opera companies to present the major, if little-known, works of this already very far advanced century, no one seemed willing to discuss them. Perhaps no one was able to.

The last gathering on the state of opera was the annual conference of OPERA America in New York the second week of December. I attended three events of the meeting: a speech by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a press conference to announce a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, and a showcase of new works. Moynihan's speech demanded an eightfold increase by the year 2000 in federal arts support. For some reason, the month-late OPERA America press release describing the Senator's speech neglected to mention either that he offered to introduce the necessary legislation himself or that he thought those interested in the arts ought to give serious thought to making campaign contributions to candidates. The Rockefeller grant press conference, dealing as it did with funds for implementing the proposals coming out of the National Institute for Music Theater Conference in Detroit last August, was chiefly interesting for the amount of opposition it provoked from such OPERA America members as Terence McEwen, general director of the San Francisco Opera, and the way in which the opposition was put down from the chair. It might also be added that OPERA America's press release on this matter failed to mention anything about the less than enthusiastic reception the Rockefeller initiative received from those who, like McEwen, worried that OPERA America might be intruding in their own work.

The OPERA America showcase, given unstaged on December 12 at the acoustically excellent Merkin Concert Hall, seemed at least to me to be (in the hoary phrase of the 1960s) part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Excerpts from five works were presented. The first piece was *Private Lives,* an inane "video opera" by the avant-gardist Robert Ashley. The music veered between soft rock and jazzy piano, the television sets (the only performers on stage) showed bright jumbles of images, and the words seemed to be concerned with "Gwyn," a girl who worked at the bank "helping people count their money." The long synopsis of the "action" contained in the program ran to some seven hundred and fifty words. I must admit to being charmed, though, by the thought of an opening night at the Met with the usual gala audience assembled to watch the TV sets do their stuff in front of the footlights. Just think of the anxiety for the management. If Sony has a short, will Zenith step in?

The next work was *X,* a piece about the life of the famous Malcolm composed by Anthony Davis, with libretto by Thulani Davis-Jarman and book by Christopher Davis, as well as additional lyrics by Deborah Atherton. Two scenes from the work were given. The first, "Chickens Come Home to Roost," was an account of Malcolm's reaction to the Kennedy assassination, the murder of Medgar Evers, and the Birmingham bombing. The second, "Mecca," concerned a confrontation between Malcolm and Elijah Muhammed over the latter's sins. The music was repetitive, with a stressing of single unaccompanied lines. The singing was generally excellent, though untrained. The general effect, given the repetition, the syncopated music, the earnest performance, and the general clumsiness, was of an updated version of American ballad opera of the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, all that was new—if that is the right word—about Davis's work was the story line. As with the Floyd opera on Huey Long, the very power of the story swamped whatever music might have been available to clothe it.

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Meredith Monk's *Dolmen Music,* the next offering, was described in the program as "an original work utilizing the solo voice as an instrument, working with the unique quality of each voice and playing with the ensemble possibilities of unison, texture, counterpoint, weaving, etc." It was written for six voices, with cello and percussion. Again, according to the program, there were "Special Musical Requirements": "Singers who have been taught Meredith Monk's vocal technique." And here, of course, is the key to the special character of the work. Though Monk has an avant-garde reputation as a dancer and composer going back two decades, her work here consists of little but the use of nontraditional vocal sounds, based on nonsense syllables, carrying melodic lines often harmonized in parallel fifths. The entire effect, while properly minimalist and owing much to the work of La Monte Young, is not always lulling. The general impression is of a very busy old-fashioned marketplace. I might add that there was no story line here at all.

Now followed an excerpt from Jon Gibson's *Voyage of the Beagle,* a group of episodes combining bits of Victoriana with scenes from Darwin's intellectual life. The excerpt given at the showcase consisted of a singer vocalizing the opening of the first book of Genesis against the background of a prerecorded tape. The music was minimalist in style (and in invention too) but maximalist in decibel level. Again, there were endless chains of parallel fifths, sometimes emerging, with the addition of the third, as triads. The repetition was on a cosmic scale. Still, the singer's frequent deviation from exact pitch on the note he kept sounding over and over, though very likely a function of the impossibility of a human being's doing anything in exactly the same way over a long time span, did add a dollop of harmonic interest. Perhaps it's a frivolous response, but as the singer kept intoning "In the Beginning" I did sometimes wish that in the music's beginning had also been its end.

The last musical event of the evening was by far the most interesting. It consisted of excerpts from *Oedipus at Colonus,* the most successful presentation in the Brooklyn Academy's "Next Wave" festival this past fall. This retelling, via Black gospel singing, of Sophocles's great play did have one great thing going for it: the remarkable improvisatorial singing of Clarence Fountain and the Five Blind Boys of Alabama. In the excerpt presented here, one was conscious less of Sophocles or of Oedipus than of the immense cry of pain, stemming from slavery, that is still locked up inside the black self-image. Here, for all to hear, was the stuff, not of operatic art or of avant-garde performance, but of an entire people's suffering. I don't know what its relevance is to opera or to the avant-garde; I don't even know what its relevance was on this night to an audience of arts administrators, New York downtown music types, and stray critics. One thing I do know. So powerful was the impact of Fountain and the Blind Boys' singing that the following excerpt from *Oedipus* seemed, in its Bob Telson score and the vocalism of the J. D. Steele Singers, like a return to commercial pop and ethnic exploitation.

And so the question remains, now in 1984 as before, Whither Opera? Where so many doctors have failed in the cure, it would be quixotic to deny that the patient is sick. An ossified repertory, a lack of new creation, a resulting attempt to find the exciting by going further and further back for interesting material, an increased questioning of the mounting costs involved—all these are real problems. Despite our permanent need to perform the classics of opera because they are among the exemplars of high culture, some attempt at an *aggiornamento* of the repertory is nevertheless required.

In this difficult attempt, the guiding principle to follow must be that of not forcing the art form to compromise its own history and integrity under the pressure of outside forces. A stop must be put to the attempts of those who do not come out of, and do not sympathize with, the ethos of great opera to *mandate* the replacement of what is alien to

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them with something that conforms to their own ideas of how the future of the art ought to look.[2] It is no more necessary to make opera houses and companies put on musicals than it is to make Broadway theaters do Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner. It is both improper and pointless to make opera audiences sit still for video operas and theatrical provocations; it is just as wrong to require The Kitchen to put on Handel and Rossini. It is not, of course, that we should bar the door to the development of new forms, either in music theater or in art in general; it is rather that we must let opera be opera, as we must let every other art be itself. Because we cannot plan the creative future,[3] because we can never know what will be an art work until it has been made, it behooves us to look to the present and to the immediate past for whatever little we can hope to know about the future.

If we will just look at what has been going on in opera in the last fifty years abroad as well as in America, we will immediately find a tremendous lack in our own knowledge and experience, a lack that extends not just to audiences and performers, but even to the very composers upon whom we must depend for the future. The sorry fact is that by and large our greatest opera institutions have a bad record of making available to the opera public the acknowledged major works of our time. Though there are some happy exceptions—the San Francisco Opera under Adler made a valiant attempt to do at least one "difficult" work every fall season, and the New York City Opera until recently took justifiable pride in its record of service to a contemporary repertory—the exceptions, alas, remain just that.

Lacking has been any leadership from the top. The Metropolitan Opera has steadfastly refused, whether under Bing or Chapin or now under Bliss and his music director James Levine, to take responsibility for the twentieth century in opera. No American works at all since the 1960s, only the tamest of post-World War II works, no *Moses und Aron* of Schoenberg, no exploration of the Henze of recent times or even of the Hindemith of a half century ago, no Richard Strauss after *Arabella,* no Bartók or Shostakovich or Prokofiev: surely, of all the world's famous opera houses, only the Bolshoi in Moscow can beat the Met for ignoring what is under its own nose—and one can hardly doubt that the Bolshoi's record in Russian opera is miles better than the Met's in American.[4] Even the Met's recent commissioning of operas from Jacob Druckman and John Corigliano, delivery date uncertain, seems hardly taken seriously by the Met management itself.

At the New York City Opera, Beverly Sills has in fact scheduled Philip Glass's *Akhnaten* for next season, following its European premiere this spring. This American performance comes after several years of the City Opera's almost completely ignoring contemporary operas, and it represents little more than a determined effort to jump on Glass's lavishly funded bandwagon. There is no sign of any attempt on the part of the City Opera management to reach into the rich recent repertory of the company for the excitement of unfamiliar material. It is difficult indeed to believe that just sixteen years ago the City Opera presented a spring season entirely devoted to *ten* American operas, including several that were performed by the company for the first time. Among these works were

2 A good place to begin the necessary tasks in opera might be at the National Endowment for the Arts itself, with a divorce of the shotgun administrative marriage of opera and musical theater, and the return of opera to the Music Program, whence it came and where it belongs.

3 In this regard, Kurt Herbert Adler's point at a recent National Council on the Arts meeting is significant: European governments, despite their generous support of new opera writing, have not been any more able than we are to bring about a supply of viable new works.

4 It must be emphasized that the Met's recent widely trumpeted negotiations for a limited presentation of a new Robert Wilson stage extravaganza involve only a rental of the house, not a Metropolitan production.

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such operas as Menotti's *Maria Golovin,* Moore's *Ballad of Baby Doe,* Moore's *The Devil and Daniel Webster,* Dello Joio's *The Triumph of Saint Joan,* Blitzstein's *Regina,* and Weisgall's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*; the last was a world premiere. Such a course would seem revolutionary indeed today.

What is now needed, it seems to me, is a general attempt on the part of American companies large and small to present, to the extent that it is within their power, a yearly conspectus of the life of opera from its beginnings to the present day. An effort ought to be made to avoid both all old masterpiece seasons and the present practice of sandwiching in whatever difficult new works are done between thick pieces of attractively sentimental works. While this doubtless well-intentioned practice may not have the effect of pacifying a hostile audience, it does prove to that audience by propinquity—Puccini on one side of the new work and Verdi or Mozart on the other—that the old works were indeed in a different league. If a continuum of works were to be presented, the audience and the performers would be trained by steps to deal with the unknown. A climate of intelligent understanding just might thus be created, in which the new works would not have to rival *Pagliacci.*

It must be said too that a shifting of part of each season's repertory to the twentieth century would have the welcome function of lessening the pressure to make old operas new by either giving them *outré* productions and stage direction or presenting them in fabulously expensive "authentic" guises. All this ingenuity is not wrong; it is just misdirected.

A close observer of the finances of opera companies would doubtless be justified in asking who, indeed, might pay for this idealistic redirection of repertory away from the surefire to the speculative. The answer is simple, but would require a revolution in how opera funding is accomplished. For many years now, a prime requirement for philanthropic funding—whether private or governmental—has been a high percentage of earned income on the opera company's annual report. That earned income, it goes without saying, must come from ticket sales; there should be little surprise in the fact that more tickets are sold to familiar operas than to unknown ones. The attitude of patrons has increasingly come to resemble that enshrined in the old saw about banks: banks are places that lend money to people who already have money. This attitude will no longer do, in the arts in general or in opera in particular. The first order of business of arts advocates ought not to be, as it is today, supporting arts institutions because they already go a long way toward paying for themselves; it ought to be convincing patrons that it is their responsibility to fund what is artistically necessary and would not exist without their support. Arts institutions, after all, are not businesses. They are, and should be when they are doing what is required of them, charities.

Perhaps the best way to end would be with a listing of operas, all completed in this century, that might provide a pool from which the works necessary to bring about a leavening of the present repertorty might be chosen. I have divided this pool into European and American lists. I have included on both lists works grand and intimate, long and short, little-known and half-familiar, more and less difficult for audiences and performers. The lists are not complete, and they include works that have been performed and dropped, or that have never received the kind of performance they deserved, or that ought to have been done but have never been done in this country at all.

Here are the European works, with their composers listed in alphabetical order and their dates in parentheses:

Bartok *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1918)
Busoni *Turandot* (1917)
Doktor Faust (1916-24; completed by Jarnach)
Dukas *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* (1906)
Falla *La Vida Breve* (1905)

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Henze *Boulevard Solitude* (1951)
Elegy for Young Lovers (1961)
Der junge Lord (1964)
Hindemith *Cardillac* (1926)
Mathis der Maler (1935)
Kodály *Háry János* (1926)
Kokkonen *The Last Temptations* (1975)
Korngold *Violanta* (1916)
Milhaud *Christophe Colomb* (1928)
Pfitzner *Die Rose vom Liebesgarten* (1900)
Palestrina (1915)
Prokofiev *The Fiery Angel* (1923)
War and Peace (1943)
Reimann *Lear* (1978)
Sallinen *The Horseman* (1974)
The Red Line (1978)
Schoenberg *Moses und Aron* (1932)
Strauss *Feuersnot* (1901)
Intermezzo (1923)
Die ägyptische Helena (1927)
Die schweigsame Frau (1934)
Friedenstag (1936)
Daphne (1937)
Die Liebe der Danae (1940)
Capriccio (1941)
Stravinsky *The Rake's Progress* (1951)
Tippett *The Midsummer Marriage* (1952)
The Knot Garden (1969)

And the American works:

Argento *The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe* (1976)
Miss Havisham's Fire (1979)
Barber *Vanessa* (1957)
Antony and Cleopatra (1966)
Copland *The Tender Land* (1954)
Gruenberg *The Emperor Jones* (1931)
Sessions *The Trial of Lucullus* (1947)
Montezuma (1963)
Taylor *Peter Ibbetson* (1931)
Thomson *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1933)
The Mother of us all (1947)
Weisgall *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1956)
Athaliah (1963)

One point deserves stress. Little good for either the present or the future of opera will be accomplished by merely presenting one individual opera chosen from these lists or from the much wider lists that doubtless could be fashioned. The need of the art is for the presentation of a broad twentieth-century repertory. There are, of course, no guarantees in my—or in anyone else's—selections. There can only be interest. Isn't that enough?

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Cyril Connolly and the groans of success

by Cynthia Ozick

I first came on a paperback reprint of Cyril Connolly's *Enemies of Promise* when I was already in my despairing middle thirties. Though I had been writing steadily and obsessively since the age of twenty-two, I was still mainly unpublished: a handful of poems, a couple of short stories, a single essay, and all in quirky little magazines printed, it seemed, in invisible ink. Connolly's stringent dissertation on the anatomy of failure had a morbid attraction for me: it was like looking up one's disease in the Merck Manual—I knew the symptoms, and it was a wound I was interested in. One day I urgently pressed my copy of Connolly on another failed writer a whole decade younger than myself; we were both teaching freshman composition at the time. He promised to read it; instead he hurried off into analysis and gay pride. I never saw the book again. My ex-colleague has, so far, never published. *Enemies of Promise* went out of print.

After that, I remembered it chiefly as a dictionary of low spirits, even as a secret autobiography. Over the years one of its interior titles—"The Charlock's Shade"—stayed with me, a mysterious phrase giving off old mournful fumes: the marsh gas writers inhale when they are not getting published, when they begin to accept themselves as having been passed by, when envy's pinch is constant and certain, when the lurch of humiliation learns to precede the predictable rebuff. Writers who publish early and regularly are not only spared these hollow desolations, but acquire habits of strength and self-confidence. Henry James, George Sand, Balzac, Mann: these amazingly prolific presences achieved as much as they did not simply because they began young, but because they were permitted to begin young. James in America started off with book reviews; so, in London, did Virginia Woolf.

But in my despairing thirties it was hardly these colossi of literary history I was fixed on. All around me writers five years older and five years younger were having their second and third novels published, establishing their idiosyncratic and intractable voices, and flourishing, sometimes with the left hand, this and that indomitable essay: Mailer's "The White Negro," Sontag's "Notes on Camp," Roth's "Writing American Fiction," Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," Styron's reply to the critics of *Nat Turner,* and so on. John Updike, the paramount American instance of early publication, conquered *The New Yorker* in his twenties, undertaking even then the body of reviewing that nowadays rivals the amplitude and weight and attentiveness of Edmund Wilson's. At about the same time, in the New Rochelle Public Library, I pulled down from a high shelf of the new-books section a first volume of stories called *By the North Gate.* The author was an unknown writer ten years my junior; not long afterward, the name Joyce Carol Oates accelerated into a ubiquitous force. A good while before that,

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in college, I had known someone who knew Truman Capote; and Capote had published in magazines before he was twenty.

In short, these were the Famous of my generation, and could be read, and read about, and mulled over, and discussed. They were—or anyhow they embodied, they were shot through with—the Issues; and meanwhile I was a suffering onlooker, shut out. I could not even say that I was being ignored—to be ignored you have first to be published. A hundred periodicals, both renowned and "little," sent me packing. An editor who later went to Hollywood to write *Superman* led me into his *Esquire* office to turn back a piece of fiction with the hard-hearted charm of indifference; he looked like someone's baby brother. Another day I stood on the threshold of the office of *The New York Review of Books,* a diffident inquirer of thirty-five, and was shooed away by a word thrown out from a distant desk; I had come to ask for a review to write. *Partisan, Kenyon, Sewanee, American Scholar, Quarterly Review, Furioso,* dozens of others, declined my submissions. An editor of a small Michigan periodical, a poet, wrote to remark that I "had yet to find a voice." In New York, a respected reader at a well-known publishing house, having in hand three-quarters of my novel, said it wouldn't do, and rocked me into a paralysis of hopelessness lasting nearly a year. And all the while I was getting older and older. Envy of the published ate at me; so did the shame of so much nibbling defeat. Twenty years of print-lust, muscular ambition, driving inquisitiveness, and all the rest, were lost in the hurt crawl away from the locked door. I wrote, and read, and filled volumes of Woolworth diaries with the outcry of failure—the failure to enter the gates of one's own literary generation, the anguish of exclusion from its argument and tone, its experience and evolution. It wasn't that I altogether doubted my "powers" (though often enough I did, profoundly, stung by disgrace); I saw them, whatever they were, scorned, disparaged, set outside the pale of welcome. I was ashamed of my life, and I lived only to read and write. I lived for nothing else; I had no other "goals," "motivations," "interests"—these shallownesses pointing to what the babblers of the hour call psychological health. Nor was it raw Fame I was after; I was not deluded that publishing a first novel at twenty-five, as Mann had done, would guarantee a *Buddenbrooks.*

What I wanted was access to the narrowest possibilities of my own time and prime; I wanted to bore a chink. I wanted a sliver of the apron of a literary platform. I wanted to use what I was, to be what I was born to be—not to have a "career," but to be that straightforward obvious unmistakable animal, a writer. I was a haunted punctuator, possessed stylist, sorter of ideas, burrower into history, philosophy, criticism; I wrote midnight poetry into the morning light; I burnished the sentences of my prose so that each might stand, I said (with the arrogance of the desperately humiliated), for twenty years. And no one would publish me.

For this predicament, it was clear, I needed not an anodyne, but salt—merciless salt. Connolly not only supplied the salt, he opened the wounds, gave names to their mouths, and rubbed in the salt. He analyzed—or so it appeared—all the venoms of failure. He spoke, in a kind of metaphoric delirium borrowed from Crabbe, of "the blighted rye," "the slimy mallow," "the wither'd ears"—all those hideous signs of poison and decomposition from which the suffocated writer, kept from the oxygen of the age, deprived of print, slowly dies. There was no victory crow to be had from reading Connolly. If he provoked any sound at all, it was the dry cough that comes with panic at the dawn's early light.

This, at least, is how, all these years, I have kept *Enemies of Promise* in my head: as a mop and sop for the long, long bleeding, the intellectual slights, the disgraced imagination, the locked doors, the enervating growths of the literary swamp, the dry cough of abandonment. The rest I seem to have forgotten, or never to have noticed at all, and now that the book is once again on

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the scene, and again in paperback,[1] I observe that it is a tripartite volume, and that, distracted by what I believed to be its diagnostic powers, I missed two-thirds of its substance. What I once saw as a pillar of salt turns out to be, in fact, a puff of spun sugar. And this is not because I have "gotten over" the pounding of denigration and rejection; I have never properly recuperated from them, and on their account resent the white hairs of middle age with a spitefulness and absurdity appropriate only to the hungry young.

"*Enemies of Promise* was first published in 1938," Cyril Connolly's 1948 Introduction begins, "as a didactic enquiry into the problem of how to write a book which lasts ten years." Yet the question of literary longevity is raised and almost instantly dropped; that this particular book has now "lasted" more than four decades is hardly the answer. And I am not sure it *has* lasted, at least in the form it claims, that is, as an essay about certain ideas. It hangs on instead as a curiosity, which does not mean it is wholly obsolete; it is only peculiar. Even in organization there is peculiarity: a trinity that does not immediately cohere. The first section divides prose style into Mandarin (a term Connolly takes credit for coining in this context) and vernacular; surely this issue is with us as bemusedly as ever. The second section—"The Charlock's Shade," which so fed my gripes and twinges—now looks to be not so much about failure as about success and its distractions. The third part, finally, is a memoir of Connolly's childhood in a boarding school for the rich called St. Wulfric's, and afterward at Eton. In my zealously partial reading long ago, though I was attracted by Connolly's definitions of Mandarin and vernacular diction, it appears I never took in the autobiographical segment at all; and what drew me to "The Charlock's Shade" (or so it now strikes me) was three lone sentences, as follows:

> Promise is like the mediaeval hangman who after settling the noose, pushed his victim off the platform and jumped on his back, his weight acting as a drop while his jockeying arms prevented the unfortunate from loosening the rope.
>
> Sloth in writers is always a symptom of an acute inner conflict, especially that laziness which renders them incapable of doing the thing which they are most looking forward to.
>
> Perfectionists are notoriously lazy and all true artistic indolence is deeply neurotic; a pain not a pleasure.

Here, and only here, was the poisonous wisdom that served my travail. All the rest supposed a sophistication and advancement that meant nothing to a writer who had barely begun, and Connolly's classifications of dangers hardly applied. To succeed as a writer, he admonished, beware of journalism, politics, "escapism," sex, and success itself. Journalism: never write "a review that cannot be reprinted, i.e. that is not of some length and on a subject of permanent value." Politics: once the writer "has a moment of conviction that his future is bound up with the working classes . . . his behaviour will inevitably alter"—in other words, he will be much improved. Escapism: drink, drugs, talk, daydreaming, religion, sloth. Sex: hazards of homosexuality, domesticity, babies, wives. And, aha, success: here the peril lies in getting taken up by the upper crust, according to E. M. Forster's dictum as cited by Connolly: "To be aristocratic in Art one must avoid polite society." But how could any of these cautionary alarms have mattered to a writer who had for years gone altogether unnoticed? Speaking for myself: I never thought about politics. Journalism was something less than a snare, since no one would offer me so much as a five-hundred-word review. I was in no danger of becoming a fad or a celebrity. I didn't drink or shoot up. I confined religion to philosophical reading, and daydreaming to a diary. I had no baby and no wife. (Connolly, though he mentions Virginia Woolf among

1 Persea Books, 265 pages, $6.95

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the Mandarins, has an ineradicable difficulty in positing a writer who is not male. This is a pity, because the writer's husband is a worthy, perplexing, and often tragic subject.) Even talk was no drain; what went up into air for others, I mainly put down in letters to literary friends—letters, those vessels of calculated permanence. Then what in Connolly could possibly appeal to the untried and the buried? In his infinite catalogues of "promise" and its risks, only the terrors of perfectionism and the pain of sure decline had the least psychological concurrence. For the sake of this pins-in-the-ribs pair, Connolly stuck.

He begins now to unstick. "It was Edmund Wilson who remarked that [*Enemies of Promise*] was not a very well-written book," Connolly confesses. Wilson was right. Connolly is a ragged writer, unraveling his rags behind him as he goes, and capable of awful sentences. If Wilson recoiled from some of them, it might have been in part on account of Connolly's description of Wilson's own *Axel's Castle,* which, we are reminded, "includes essays on Yeats, Valéry, Eliot, Proust, Joyce and Gertrude Stein. His summing up," Connolly continues in a typically unpunctuated long breath, "is against them, in so far as it is against their cult of the individual which he feels they have carried to such lengths as to exhaust it for a long time to come but it is a summing up which also states everything that can be said in their favour when allowance for what I have termed 'inflation' is made." (Observe that the style is neither Mandarin nor vernacular, but Rattling Boxcars.)

Patches of this sort might unglue any essayist, but there is something beyond mere prose at stake. Did Connolly notice that his so-called enemies of promise were in reality the appurtenances of certain already-achieved successes? The warning that journalism threatens art applies, after all, only to fairly established writers long familiar with the practice of getting paid for writing. "He is apt to have a private income, he renews himself by travel," Connolly says of the homosexual writer, assuming long-standing privilege and money. A successful wife, he remarks, is not only "intelligent and unselfish enough to understand and respect the working of the unfriendly cycle of the creative imagination," but "will recognize that there is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall." And of course: "Of all the enemies of literature, success is the most insidious."

Does failure ever appear at all in *Enemies of Promise*—the word or the idea? Once. "Failure is a poison like success. Where a choice is offered, prefer the alkaline," and that is all. Such sentiments burn rather than salve. And even while cautioning against the "especial intimacies" of the fashionable, Connolly has a good word for them: "It must be remembered that in fashionable society can be found warmhearted people of delicate sensibility who form permanent friendships with artists which afford them ease and encouragement for the rest of their lives and provide them with sanctuary." And in defense of the seductions of wealth not one's own: "It is because we envy [social success] more than other success that we denounce it so often," Connolly explains. He himself does not denounce the ingratiation of writers with the rich so much as their ingratiation with one another:

> There is a kind of behaviour which is particularly dangerous on the moving staircase—the attempt to ascend it in groups of four or five who lend a hand to each other and dislodge other climbers from the steps. It is natural that writers should make friends with their contemporaries of talent and express a mutual admiration but it leads inevitably to a succession of services rendered and however much the writers who help each other may deserve it, if they too frequently proclaim their gratitude they will arouse the envy of those who stand on their own feet, who succeed without collaboration. Words like "log-rolling" and "back-scratching" are soon whispered and the death-watch ticks the louder.

The death-watch? If there is any warning being rattled in all this, surely it must com-

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pete with the complicit wink of the sound counselor. A denunciation, one might say, that has the look of a paragraph in a handbook on the wherewithal of success. And a wherewithal that, at a particular rung of society, is affable enough: the comfortable network of class and school associations.

It is the moment for bluntness. *Enemies of Promise* is an essay—according to the usual English conventions of the early part of the twentieth century—about class and modishness. It has almost no other subject important to Connolly. There are digressions on, say, age, that are nearly worthwhile—more worthwhile when the aperçu is not Connolly's own (though the syntax is): "Butler said an author should write only for people between twenty and thirty as nobody read or changed their opinions after that." There is much recognizable humanity in this, whereas Connolly, attempting to generalize in his own voice, manages mainly a self-indulgent turn: "The shock, for an intelligent writer, of discovering for the first time that there are people younger than himself who think him stupid is severe." Or: "It would seem that genius is of two kinds, one of which blazes up in youth and dies down, while the other matures, like Milton's or Goethe's . . . . The artist has to decide on the nature of his own or he may find himself exhausted by the sprint of youth and unfitted for the marathon of middle age." As if one could choose to be Milton or Goethe merely by deciding, as Connolly advises, to "become a stayer." Modishness dominates: the notion of likely styles of intent, the short-length will and the longer-range.

Modishness rules especially in the politics. Writing in 1948 (the famous year of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), Connolly suggests that he has "retained all the engagingly simple left-wing militancy [of 1938] since it breathes the air of the period." True enough: ten years after its composition, Connolly is offering us *Enemies of Promise* frankly as a period piece. But the point of the exercise, we are bound to remember, is that ten years after its composition he is also offering it as a successful instance of "how to write a book which lasts ten years." Are we to conclude, then, that the more a book is dated, the longer its chances of survival? A remarkable hypothesis. No, it won't wash, this period-piece candor: Connolly had no wish to revise or update or tone down the "left-wing militancy" (less "engaging," forty-five years later, and in an age of left-linked terrorism, than he might have supposed); perhaps it was only "artistic indolence." Or perhaps it was because of an intuition about his own character and its style: a certain seamlessness, the absence of self-contradiction. Connolly is always on the side of his own class, never more so than in his expression of "left-wing militancy." It is not that Connolly, in 1938, is mistaken when he declares that "today the forces of life and progress are ranging on one side, those of reaction and death on the other," or that "fascism is the enemy of art," or that "we are not dealing with an Augustus who will discover his Horace and his Virgil, but with Attila or Hulaku, destroyers of European culture whose poets can contribute only battle-cries and sentimental drinking songs." He means Hitler: but the very next year, in 1939, the year of the Hitler-Stalin pact, would he have been willing to mean Stalin too? "The poet is a chemist and there is more pure revolutionary propaganda in a line of Blake than in all *The Rights of Man,*" he asserts: a sophistry that can only be the flower of an elitist education. In 1938 what literary intellectual was not moved by the word "revolutionary"?

Nothing, in fact, is less dated than the combination of Connolly's elitism and his attraction to revolutionary militancy. Any superficial excursion into universities in Western Europe and the United States currently bears this out, nowhere more vividly than in American elitist departments, history, literature, and political science especially. All this is a cliché of our predicament as it was of Connolly's. "The atmosphere of orthodoxy is always damaging to prose," Orwell wrote in *Inside the Whale,* and here is Connolly as prooftext: "Often [solidarity with the working classes] will be recognized

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only by external symptoms, a disinclination to wear a hat or a stiff collar, an inability to be rude to waiters or taxi-drivers or to be polite to young men of his own age with rolled umbrellas, bowler hats and 'Mayfair men' moustaches or to tolerate the repressive measures of his class." This wizened sentence may be worth the belly laugh due anachronism, but its undigested spirit lingers on. For "disinclination to wear a hat" substitute an earnest inclination to wear Ché boots. And "the repressive measures of his class" is as bruisingly trite and vacuous as any bright young Ivy League graduate's assault on the American bourgeoisie, of which he or she is the consummate product.

The consummate product of his class. Should Connolly be blamed for this? Probably. Orwell went to the same schools at the same time, Eton preceded by St. Cyprian's (St. Wulfric's in Connolly's genial account, Crossgates in Orwell's lugubrious one), and saw straight through what Connolly thrived on. Orwell despised the tyrant-goddess who ruled over St. Cyprian's; Connolly maneuvered to get on her good side. And of Eton Connolly writes (in the ardently arrested parochial tone of one of the "bloody-minded people at the top"), "My last two years of Eton . . . were among the most interesting and rewarding of my whole life and I do not believe they could have been so at any other public school or in any other house than College." The allusion is to school elections; Connolly was, we learn, an ecstatic member of the exclusive "Pop," which he counts, along with romantic homoerotic adolescence, among those "experiences undergone by boys at the great public schools . . . so intense as to dominate their lives." Orwell, reviewing *Enemies of Promise* soon after its appearance, hoots: "He means it!" And sums up the politics of those cosseted few who, between 1910 and 1920, after "five years in a lukewarm bath of snobbery," have fabricated sympathies they have no way of feeling: "Hunger, hardship, solitude, exile, war, prison, persecution, manual labor—hardly even words. No wonder," Orwell charges, "that the huge tribe known as 'the right left people' found it so easy to condone the purge-and-Ogpu side of the Russian régime and the horrors of the First Five Year Plan. They were so gloriously incapable of understanding what it all meant."

Nothing in his brief 1948 introductory note to *Enemies of Promise* tells us whether Connolly did or did not remain one of the right left people a decade later. "We grow up among theories and illusions common to our class, our race, our time," Connolly opens his school-days memoir, but only as a frame for the apology that follows: "I have to refer to something which I find intolerable, the early aura of large houses, fallen fortunes and county families common to so many English autobiographies." He ends by fretting over whether "the reader can stomach this." What is even harder to stomach is a self-repudiation that is indistinguishable from self-congratulation. The memoir itself, with its luxuriant pleasure in "our class, our race, our time," its prideful delight in British Platonism, "popping up in sermons and Sunday questions . . . at the headmaster's dinner-parties or in my tutor's pupil-room," its insurmountable glorying in the stringent achievements of an English classical education—the memoir itself repudiates nothing, least of all the narrator's background, character, or capacities. To preface such an account of high social and intellectual privilege with the hope that it can be "stomached," and then to proceed with so much lip-smacking delectation, is, as Orwell saw, to understand nothing, and to stop at words.

Words, it turns out, are what deserve to last in *Enemies of Promise*—not Connolly's own sentences, which puff and gasp and occasionally strangle themselves, but the subject of his observations about styles of prose. Critical currencies have altered in the extreme since Connolly first set down his categories of Mandarin and vernacular, and unless one reminds oneself that these terms once had some originality of perspective (they are not so facile as they sound), they drop into the hackneyed posture they now

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permanently evoke. It is true that the New Criticism, which had the assurance of looking both omnipotent and immortal, has come and gone, and that the universal semiotics shock even now hints at softening, if not receding (though only slightly, and then out of factionalism). And other volumes of this kind, siblings or perhaps descendants of *Enemies of Promise,* have ventured to record the politics and history of the writer's predicament—among them critical summaries by Malcolm Cowley, Van Wyck Brooks, John Aldridge, Alfred Kazin, Tony Tanner, Tillie Olsen. The post-Connolly landscape is cluttered with new literary structures of every variety. All the same, Connolly's report on the increasing ascendancy of journalistic style over the life of contemporary fiction—language stripped of interpretive complexity, language stripped even of "language," that is, of the resources of the lyrical or intellectual imagination—remains urgent. The Mandarin "dialect," as Connolly intelligently calls it (and he is wary in his praise of it, especially when it decays into dandyism, "the ability to spin cocoons of language out of nothing"), has now given way to a sort of minimalist data-prose, in which sympathies and deductive acuities are altogether eliminated. In poetry, the minimalists (whether, in all their determined phalanxes, they know it or not) are by now played out, moribund, ready for a turning; only the other day I heard a leading subjectivist, a lineal heir of William Carlos Williams, yearn aloud to sink into a long Miltonic sequence. But among fiction writers, the fossilized Hemingway legacy hangs on, after all this time, strangely and uselessly prestigious. (I attribute this not to the devoted reading of Hemingway but to the decline of reading in general.)

Connolly's distinctions and his exposition of them, however, address the adherents of both "dialects." "From the Mandarins," he exhorts, the writer

> must borrow art and patience, the striving for perfection, the horror of clichés, the creative delight in the material [a phrase that itself arouses horror], in the possibilities of the long sentence and the splendour and subtlety of the composed phrase.
>
> From the Mandarins . . . the new writer will take warning not to capitalise indolence and egotism nor to burden a sober and delicate language with exhibitionism. There will be no false hesitation and woolly profundities, no mystifying, no Proustian onanism.

From the "talkie-novelists," he continues—that is, from the laconic anti-stylists influenced by film—the new writer can acquire the "cursive style, the agreeable manners, the precise and poetical impact of Forster's diction, the lucidity of Maugham, last of the great professional writers, the timing of Hemingway, the smooth cutting edge of Isherwood, the indignation of Lawrence, the honesty of Orwell," as well as the gift of construction. (It is notable that in nearly fifty years not one of these names, not excluding Maugham and Isherwood, has lost its high familiarity, and Orwell, at least, has increased in prestige.) The defects of realist or colloquial style Connolly lists as the consequence of "flatness"—"the homogeneity of outlook, the fear of eccentricity, the reporter's horror of distinction, the distrust of beauty, the cult of violence and starkness that is masochistic." Nowadays we might add the conviction of existential nihilism. "It is no more a question of taking sides about one way or another of writing, but a question of timing," Connolly sensibly concludes. All these are good and salubrious particulars—though it is worth recalling that, in prose at least, and wherever we find ourselves in the cycle of reaction, there are no stripped-down Conrads or Joyces; and that modernism never turned its back on plenitude.

As for my own disappointment in encountering *Enemies of Promise* after so long a hiatus: it was never Connolly's fault that I made up a book that wasn't there. I wanted to brood over failure. Connolly presides over the groans of success. He knows no real enemies—unless you count the threat to revolution ambushed in Mayfair moustaches.

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Picasso's finale

by Jed Perl

"Picasso: The Last Years, 1963-1973," opening this month at the Guggenheim Museum, almost didn't happen. Organized originally by the Grey Art Gallery, a small museum at New York University, and scheduled to open there in November, the show ran into funding problems and, in their wake, postponements. In late December, just as the catalogue was being published, the Grey Art Gallery was forced to cancel—and the Guggenheim, with its far greater resources, stepped in to save the day.[1]

Nothing Picasso ever did is exactly overlooked, but it is significant that the first museum in the United States to plan a show of Picasso's last works is small, adventuresome, and rather underfunded. In the United States late Picasso does not, generally, get its due. Everybody knows the etchings of *Suite 347* and the brash, gaping faces of the late oils. Because these things are signed "Picasso" they are accepted (or, at least, forgiven). Since the 1960s the works have had a following among some art historians, who have emphasized their pyrotechnical feats of historic reference. Recently, trend spotters in the painting world, thinking of Neo-Expressionism, have been calling the late style prophetic. But the terms used to describe the work suggest a kind of disappointment. When a genius starts being called brilliant or prophetic the real message may be that he's lost his genius. In France, André Malraux spoke movingly and most convincingly of the oil paintings done between 1968 and 1972. In the United States, Clement Greenberg is among the very few critics who have even asked the right questions. Greenberg's writings on the later Picasso are unsparing and ultimately critical of most everything Picasso did after the Thirties, but they do have the rare virtue of taking nothing for granted. Greenberg insists on judging Picasso by the standard Picasso himself helped to set for twentieth-century art—that it be as good as anything ever done.[2]

At the Museum of Modern Art's 1980 Picasso retrospective the selection of works from the last five years was small but very strong. It was said at the time that William Rubin, the curator, had somehow stacked things so as to put the late Picasso in a good light. I had read, before seeing the retrospective, Malraux's book *Picasso's Mask* and was disposed to like the works. Later, the paintings I saw here and there in galleries tended to confirm the impression of Rubin's selection, and in 1981, after

1 "Picasso: The Last Years, 1963-1973" will be on view at the Guggenheim Museum from March 2 through May 6.

2 Clement Greenberg's writings on the late Picasso are "Picasso at Seventy-five," which is included in his collection *Art & Culture* (Beacon Press, 1961); "Picasso Since 1945," which appeared in *Artforum* in October, 1966; and his contribution to "Picasso: A Symposium," which appeared in *Art in America* in December, 1980.

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the Pace Gallery mounted a major show of late paintings from the estate, I had no doubts left. There was hardly a bad painting at Pace and there were many great ones. The works at Pace struck with a stinging force, a force like a jolt. But the jolt was just the beginning. These paintings resonate. They have an incantatory power that is strange, violent, and—finally—absolute.

The craziness, the very "lateness" of these paintings, drawings, and prints gives them an aura of romantic myth. Few paintings seem quite so boastful—so determined to convince us that they have been created from the edge of the abyss. The themes—death, hope, love, fear—are the big ones. Picasso is laying all his chips on the table. The manner of the paintings is, by any standard, large-gestured, rhetorical. The figures in the late paintings—and they are, most all of them, paintings of figures—seek to propose the terms of their own existence. Each face seems to say: Don't judge me—accept me. Perhaps they all know that by any classical measure the paintings that they inhabit will be judged failures. Take it or leave it: that is the challenge thrown up by Picasso's cast of characters. This is hoax or epiphany, either/or. No compromise is possible.

To write warmly of the late works is, inevitably, to appeal to feeling. Accepting them I find easy. But thinking about them makes me uncomfortable, for the effects touch at a stratum of emotion that has no connection with understanding. It is difficult to judge the quality of the sentiment that has gone into them. These are paintings that can be seized by revelation or illumination. I am not sure that they can be known. In 1957, Clement Greenberg said that Picasso "has for years now shown a distrust of his facility and its promptings, and he seems to try to avoid anything that might suggest its presence. But the real consequence of this distrust is perverseness: he too deliberately makes things crabbed and clumsy, as a matter of effect rather than of cause, of choice rather than necessity." There is, as Greenberg seems to suggest, a queerness about the crudity of much of the later work. Greenberg wrote this in the Fifties, but the "crabbed and clumsy" quality is present to the end. The last canvases have no life as pure painting. The effects do not grow out of the necessity of the painting process. These canvases are not painting as painting—or, if they are, they are fiascoes. They are nuts, off-the-wall: the late paintings seem caught in the very act of jumping out of their own skins.

Late Picasso lacks the easy completeness of much classic art. If it has, finally, a classic simplicity, it is at the same time almost baroque in its celebration of human appetites and desires. Picasso seems a sort of artistic alchemist turning the base metal of sex jokes, stock characters, and silliness into the pure gold of pictorial form. Such transformations are supremely mysterious—a guide was needed, and, as if by magic, it appeared.

André Malraux's book *Picasso's Mask* (published in France in 1974 as *La Tete d'obsidienne*) is part of the multi-volume memoirs Malraux was working on at the end of his life.[3] Part reminiscence, part criticism, part aesthetics, *Picasso's Mask* is composed in eight sections. It opens when Malraux, who is in the process of "bringing up to date" his notes about the Spanish Civil War, receives a call from Picasso's widow, Jacqueline, whom he has never met. She would like his help in fulfilling Picasso's wish to have his collection of paintings by Matisse, Cézanne, Renoir, Corot, Le Douanier Rousseau, and others placed in the Louvre en bloc, kept together rather than dispersed through the Louvre collections.

Malraux flies south to see Jacqueline and then begins a tour through Picasso's collection of paintings by other artists. This is followed, in the book's second section, by a series of meditations occasioned by the rooms full of sculpture in Picasso's last home, Notre Dame de Vie. Intermingled with the account of the visit are memories of Malraux's visits and conversations with

3 *Picasso's Mask* was published in 1976 by Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

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Picasso, mostly, it seems, in the Forties. Section 3 concerns the great exhibition of Picasso's works from 1969 and 1970 held at the Palais des Papes in Avignon in the summer of 1970. In Section 4, Malraux is back at Picasso's villa and begins an elaborate reminiscence of conversations with Picasso during which he discussed his idea of the Museum Without Walls. In the later parts of the book the focus shifts somewhat away from Picasso to a discussion of an exhibition at the Fondation Maeght devoted to the Museum Without Walls. In the final section, Malraux goes with Jacqueline to visit Picasso's grave on the grounds of the Château de Vauvenargues. Malraux's thoughts return to Picasso's sculpture. He recalls Jacqueline saying to them, sadly, "All of you—you'll never become sculptures, never again." The magician is dead.

Malraux can, I suppose, be criticized for using Picasso to aggrandize his own theory of the Museum Without Walls. Picasso's vision is seen, posthumously, through long, complex conversations, as supporting Malraux's own. It is scarcely credible that Malraux—even with notes—remembered these conversations all that accurately. But even if what Malraux has Picasso say is not quite what Picasso said, it is still poetically right—it illuminates the paintings. (We overvalue the truth of fact, undervalue the truth of fiction: how much of what we "know" from Vasari and Condivi of Michelangelo must really be fiction?) And even if Malraux does use Picasso to bolster his ideas, *Picasso's Mask* owes its power to the fact that Malraux, almost as much a cultural legend as Picasso, can, more than most, confront Picasso on his own level. There is nothing picturesque about Malraux's portrait of him. Picasso is regarded with utter seriousness and openness but without a trace of sentimentality. Malraux's image of Jacqueline as a widow is clear, light, remarkable. One senses that this is a just portrait of a world, and that Malraux has some real understanding of the man at the center of that world.

If a simple thesis can be ascribed to this complex book, it is that there are two Picassos. Surveying the riches of the artist's studio, Malraux writes:

> It was clear from the heaps of paintings I was examining that Picasso had only two manners. The first is the collection of canvases that made up the Picasso Museum: the Blue period, the Rose period, stage sets, and Cubism; the second all the others and most of the sculptures. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and *Guernica* belong to both. In those, the division between Cubism and the convulsive works corresponded to the break between what Picasso had inherited from Cézanne and what he had inherited from Van Gogh. "Pity us," wrote Apollinaire, "we who are enduring this endless quarrel between Order and Adventure . . . ."

For Malraux, there is the Cubist Picasso and there is the demonic Picasso. Picasso is both architect, builder of pictures, and magus, master of the Other.

Malraux describes this revelation of the dual Picasso as coming to him after World War II as he contemplated a group of canvases that Picasso had brought together in a room of his Grands-Augustins studio.

> In the studio on the floor above, Picasso had gathered together a throng of arbitrary figures that had been peripheral to his art for twenty years without conquering it. Here, one after another, were the rediscovered heirs to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and his Negro period, with eyes where the ears ought to be, breasts where the knees ought to be—the Martian children of his *Figures at the Seaside,* his *Lovers* of 1920, his *Woman Asleep* (that bristling sign, all hooks, which Kahnweiler had kept for thirty-seven years), his extraordinary *Crucifixion,* with its strings of shoulder blades and thighbones, his *Weeping Woman,* and all the forms that anticipated those which his genius-in-chains was later so lavishly to produce; also recent figures akin to them—*The Blue Hat,* his portraits of Dora Maar, the *Child with a Lobster,* the *Woman with Artichoke*—all of which the newspapers had already labeled "Monsters." Assembled in one place, those paintings, which, at first described as "humbug"

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> or "moronic," and then called "provocative" and "gratuitous," in fact revealed what his tangled profiles within full-view faces had—within the category of distortion—in common with his splintered *Crucifixion*. All of them were works carried to an extreme. If anyone had asked him yet again, "What are those?" he would have replied, "Paintings." Before that day I had seen only three or four of them, and knew a few others from photographs.
>
> That particular group had no connection with any other of his works that had been exhibited. Since the beginning of the war—even since the Spanish Civil War—I had seen very few paintings. At Picasso's, only still lifes. Hardly any of his sculptures were known at the time, and they were not to be exhibited until twenty years later, at the Petit Palais. As far as I was concerned, and those of my friends who hadn't visited either his studio or Boisgeloup, the last and most masterful expression of his genius was *Guernica*. At first I got the impression that those eighty canvases pointed to a new manner; yet they had been painted with long intervals between each one since 1919. By assembling them all in one place Picasso had isolated the virus of his art—the virus, not the leavening agent, for certain of his major works (and above all *Guernica*) belonged to another world, if not to another style of painting altogether. No one could have known that those fragments of meteorites would become the heralds of his tarots.

Tarots are what Malraux calls the paintings of the last five years. It is a brilliant term: the paintings are flat—almost heraldic in their frontality—and, like the cards of the tarot deck, they are fates, figures of fortune.

For Malraux, the eighty-odd canvases seen in the 1940s define the "virus" of Picasso's art. This virus is the urge, the need to express, through a new sort of representational art, the unseeable, the felt. In the marvelous back and forth of their conversations, Picasso and Malraux discuss the mystery of religious art. They agree that when the Mesopotamian, Romanesque, and Hindu sculptors carved a face what they were carving was the image, not of man, but of god. What gives the Romanesque face its power, they argue, is its connection to god. It is not a face, it is a mask—the mask of god—and the phrase that runs through Malraux's book is a phrase of Picasso's: "I must absolutely find the mask."

For Malraux, works like the casually painted, almost unfinished-looking *Woman with Artichoke* of 1941 provide a key to what happens in Picasso's last work. This seated woman brandishing an artichoke that is both scepter and weapon is no one in particular, but rather a masked goddess, Queen of the Kitchen—a kitchen witch. Malraux sees the virus of Picasso's art as growing, during the 1950s, not so much in Picasso's paintings as in his sculpture. *Woman with Baby Carriage,* and *Girl Jumping Rope* are masks—but masks of a new and difficult kind, for they are the masks of a secular age and refer, not to the unknowableness of some known god, but rather to the unknown itself. Malraux argues that the final, central search of Picasso's art is for a visual concoction of pure mystery, the unreal and the unknown manifest as paint. For Malraux, this is the achievement of the musketeers, mothers, lovers, clowns, and children of the last five years.

The subject of the late paintings is, above all else, the figure: it has little or no context; it stares out at us. Such images had been a part of Picasso's art since the Negro Period, but it is really in the late 1930s and early 1940s that they begin to crowd into Picasso's scene, a strange parade of men and women who fill the horizon to the exclusion of all else. These are the perhaps more innocent, surely less evolved relatives of the tarots. These figures, each the product of a radically new concatenation of color, line, and form, seize center stage. The paintings are magical feats of structural invention, but they are also, in a sense, compositionally uninventive. Where modern painters often take as their subject composition itself, here Picasso, like the great portrait painters of the seventeenth century, returns again and again to the most basic of compositional ideas: a figure front and center.

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Some observations of Susan Sontag's on the difference between pre-modern and modern literature, contained in her essay "Approaching Artaud," seem, by analogy, to shed a good deal of light on the meaning of the portraits Picasso began to do in the late Thirties. "All pre-modern literature," Sontag writes, "evolves from the classical conception of writing as an impersonal, self-sufficient, freestanding achievement. Modern literature projects a quite different idea: the romantic conception of writing as a medium in which a singular personality heroically exposes itself." Substitute portrait painting for "writing" and "literature" and you have a very telling comment on Picasso's figures. Classically, the subject of the portrait is the sitter. It may be the sitter as understood or viewed by the artist, but the intent is, finally, to reveal the person's essence. This could be said of Picasso's portraits of earlier years, such as the great one of Gertrude Stein. But in the late Thirties something happens to Picasso's portraits. It happens, most clearly, in the portraits of Dora Maar. The sitter is no longer the subject, but a kind of receiver, absorbing the psychic state of the artist. The portrait is a mind-print of the painter. The late tarots have some of the same quality, though they are not even begun with a sitter in mind. They are etherealized: allegories of nothing.

Little Picasso did between the mid-1940s and the late 1960s is essential to an understanding of the formal character of the late work. The final oils—they are, really, spirit portraits, almost psychic emanations—bring to a climax tendencies first glimpsed in the work of the 1930s and, even further back, in some of the solitary figures of the Negro Period. The great, strange assemblage sculptures of the 1950s transpose this mad vision into the third dimension; but the general drift of Picasso's career in the 1950s and 1960s is in other directions.

In the 1950s Picasso developed a taste for grand, old-fashioned compositions. *Massacre in Korea, Rape of the Sabines,* and the many series of copies from the old masters are acts of annexation, of appropriation, and they put the essentially personal—even idiosyncratic—quality of Picasso's genius under considerable strain. There is always a tendency for us to seek out the hyperbolic in Picasso, but this is simply not his best vein in the postwar period. As in the period around 1920, in the 1950s and 1960s Picasso often seems most himself when he is expressing his sense of the world as whole, normative and serene. There are fine paintings in this period—and they are surprising, because they are sweetly traditional. There are small, radiant landscapes—some almost Renoir-ish, others redolent of Le Douanier Rousseau and the Italian primitives—and dense, lucid interiors that may be the most purely French of all Picasso's works.

If we accept in Leonardo da Vinci the large part of his career that was devoted to the making of things other than great paintings, why not in Picasso? Looking through a 1958 issue of the Swiss magazine *Du* devoted to Picasso and the bullfight, one sees a lovely series of aquatints for Pepe Illo's *Tauromaquia* and several astonishing ceramics. There is a 1956 ceramic tile of his young son Claude as a toreador in which the quick, deft rendering of the head and the dabs of gold paint on the costume give an effect of delectable, radiant freedom. And there is a 1957 oval plate that Picasso has transformed into a bullring, so that when one looks at it from the proper angle the far rim becomes the distant, crowded rows of spectators and the flat of the dish becomes the ring, with toreador confronting bull and deep shadows slanting across one side.

I never had much feeling for Picasso's ceramics until an abstract painter commented, while we looked at some mounted on pedestals, that they would look much better and make more sense sitting among the jumble of a dinner table, holding food and drink. Picasso must have felt the same way, for he said to Malraux, after showing him some of his plates, "You can eat on them." The creator of *Ma Jolie, The Three Musicians,* and the *Woman with Artichoke* needn't have bothered

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with such stuff. But he did. Perhaps it involved a kind of sloughing off of excess baggage, a final ridding of himself of pretty, worldly things. In the 1950s Picasso resides in a magical but rather terrestrial sort of dream garden. After that, in the late 1960s, he goes back where he was before, into the lonely tower of his imagination.

Like the show organized at the Basel Kunstmuseum in 1981, the Grey/Guggenheim show focuses on a period of ten years but really emphasizes the last five years. Why Gert Schiff, the curator of the show, opens it with 1963 may be inferred from his essay in the catalogue,[4] which begins with Picasso, in 1962, spending an evening with friends looking at slides of Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents* and David's *Sabines*. The image of Picasso sitting for hours, deep into the night, chewing over the old masters seems to appeal to Schiff, and he thinks the resulting paintings remarkable. But Picasso's 1962-1963 *Rape of the Sabines* series succeeds only in turning classical figure composition into a kind of lumpish, quasi-Cubist hash in which flattened forms project unpleasantly into a traditional landscape space. If these paintings prove anything, it is that the glories of Picasso's late style will not derive from any definable dependence on old-master models. (For *Guernica*, classical models had been relevant, but *Guernica's* weird black-and-white marriage of Cubism and classical action adheres not through formal logic but through the immediacy of its human and political drama.) Though the early and mid-1960s contain wonderful things and things suggestive of the glories to come, it is more logical to place the beginning of Picasso's final phase in 1968, with the creation of *Suite 347*.

Where the late paintings, for the most part, present figures in ones and twos, the etchings are often crowded with four, five, and more figures. They declare a universe of thought and feeling whose individual parts will be more closely examined in the canvases of the next few years. The central theme of *Suite 347* is a sexual masquerade that, in the way of masquerades, keeps veering off into self-exposure. There are sensual, big-eyed young men and women whose firmly rounded faces, arms, and legs burst with the first maturity one feels in Greek sculptures of the very early fifth century B.C. And there are thin, tense figures of men and women out of the seventeenth and eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, suffocating in costumes and mannerisms, aged by the burdens of their own civilization. Picasso seems to feel the etching plate as a very shallow space: the figures line up, straggle along its bottom perimeter.

Out of these assemblages of figures emerge some of the greatest images in the entire history of the print. There are works of pure poetry, like the marvelously stippled aquatint of 5/25/68, in which the boy Picasso—posed with two gentlemen, an old lady, and a large, young, nude woman—emits a fragrance of cultivated innocence as palpable as that in any Pompeiian fresco. Other plates suggest a kind of intellectual delirium, none more so than the great etching of 5/13/68, in which the old Picasso, flanked by his whole entourage of clergy, clowns, ladies, gentlemen, and kids, focuses an old-fashioned camera on three buxom graces who are camping it up around a fountain that is also a street lamp. I would say this is the most remarkable use of the image of the photographer in modern art, but I am hard pressed to think of any other example at all. In its range of feeling and in the almost cinematic way the scenes, viewed consecutively, compose in the mind a larger vision, *Suite 347* recalls Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua. *Suite 347* is an Arena Chapel for the twentieth century: secularized, miniaturized, the great expanse of frescoed wall reduced to the dimensions of the etcher's plate.

The late prints represent the last stand of some crafty old rococo storyteller. The late drawings, despite the mannerist twistings of

4 *Picasso: The Last Years, 1963-1973,* by Gert Schiff, was published by George Braziller in association with the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center at New York University; 144 pages, $35 (cloth), $17.50 (paper).

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their lines, have a breathtaking plainness. The late paintings are both plain and fancy. Looking at the canvases, one is always conscious of the speed of their execution. The speed, though, does not seem the result of happy improvisation, but rather of some kind of lightning-quick certainty. Picasso's looped, curving line goes to its mark with the directness of a bullet leaving a gun. In the late drawings, soft pencil or scratchy pen lines recall the lines of that greatest of all draftsmen, Leonardo da Vinci: one experiences the line not as a finished thing but as an unfolding, a lyric journey of the imagination guided by a voracious, diamond-hard intellect.

In the paintings each line, each color shape seems intent on achieving its own private purpose. Lines run over lines, colors over colors, as if each journey of the brush across the canvas had a priority that put every other stroke into the shade. As in some of Matisse's most informal paintings of the 1910-1920 period, in Picasso's last pictures the traces of the changes that occur during the painting process remain. In the work of lesser artists such remnants are confessions of the difficulties that plague their art. In Matisse and Picasso the rightness of what has been rejected only underlines the clarity that informs the artist's vision from first stroke to last.

Writing about the late style of Titian, Erwin Panofsky said that, like all late styles, it was composed of "a coincidence of opposites: intense emotion and outward stillness, color and non-color, the broadest and apparently almost chaotic technique of execution and the most rigid order and density of composition." Picasso's late paintings suggest, especially in their formal dimension, a similar conjunction of opposites. The figures fill the picture space. They command it, like the King, Queen, and Knave of the deck of playing cards to which Malraux compares them. The tightness with which the figures fit into the frame of the canvas gives the images a playing-card stillness, but their internal realization works in the opposite direction. The thrashing brushstrokes act like uppers, injecting a scary exuberance into the bodies of these helpless figures.

Picasso's last works, like the late paintings of Braque, mix pre-Cubist and Cubist painting ideas to startling effect. Both Picasso and Braque insist in their later works on the edge of the painting framing sensuous, fictive space not unlike the space of the old masters. It is this insistence on a kind of pre-Cubist space—perhaps it could best be called Baroque—that makes the pictures appear to some viewers fussy, old-fashioned. But, unlike most post-Cubist representational painters, Picasso and Braque reinstate the old space only in order to confound it. This is what happens in Braque's late, great Studio paintings. It happens as well in many of the strongest and many of the weakest of Picasso's late paintings, where he unites Baroque space with the unbounded, space-penetrating forms of Cubism. In the very best of Picasso's late paintings—executed, as so often with Picasso, very rapidly in one or a few sessions—this giddy balancing act carries him to a new kind of expression.

The grip-lock in which Picasso can simultaneously hold together the logic of both abstract and figurative forms has few analogies in any art. Again, it is Malraux who has been most helpful in explicating this difficult work. He relates Picasso's late canvases to the mysterious bronze plaques of animals—the art of the Steppes—created somewhere between the third century B.C. and the third century A.D. in the vast reaches where Europe and Russia meet China and the East. "Just as the people of the Steppes contributed claws and talons to the definitive thrust of their convulsive ideograms," Malraux writes, "Picasso invented propeller-shaped nostrils, networks and swords, and knotted strips which are unknotted or confuted by the lines that surround them."

It is the power of the late paintings to conflate old and new, Baroque and Cubist, that lies at the heart of their achievement. This is a late style to which an almost ludicrous range of Western art can be related:

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Giotto, Titian, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Goya, and Van Gogh are all present, as are Picasso's own, earlier incarnations, especially the Negro Period and the period of Marie-Thérèse and Dora Maar. What is surprising, though, is not the depths that Picasso plumbs in older art but the extraordinary uses to which he can put figures (like the musketeers of Rembrandt) that he treats as if they were little more than jocular cardboard puppets. Picasso's soldiers, lovers, and families are the opposite of those of Velázquez and Rembrandt: they have no psychological depth—they are impersonal. Though figurative art is generally better where its effects are more specific, certain late styles—Poussin's, Titian's, Picasso's—prove to be exceptions. The figures in Poussin's *Four Seasons,* in Titian's *Nymph and Shepherd,* in Picasso's late works are extremely general, almost generic: they are ciphers. Somehow, in the last works of these artists, sadness and happiness, fear and ecstasy are conflated. Titian's last pastoral and late *Pietà* inhabit a similar realm of feeling. All expression becomes one: expression itself.

It is this kind of absorption of the specific into the general that probably accounts for the startling power of Picasso's kissing lovers. In the West, Christian morality has had an inhibiting effect on sex in art. Only one artist, Rubens, has demonstrated that sex unencumbered by contemplation or retrospective sadness can be subject matter in the grand tradition. Rubens's *Garden of Love* reveals a ribaldry more commonly associated with genre painting; but Picasso goes much further. The erect penises and wide-open vaginas of his lovers, both in the paintings and the etchings, recall sex manuals and pornography. Rubens subjects the conventional gestures of flirtation to a formal analysis that elevates them without sanitizing them; Picasso renders his thrusts, penetrations, and entanglements with a sincerity and a formal conviction that demonstrate the fundamental integrity at the heart of his trashy models.

Ever since he drew the figures of the Blue Period during his first hard years in Paris, Picasso was a kind of Expressionist, absorbed in the great questions of love and loneliness. But he was also, almost from the beginning, one of the great form-givers, master of an expressionism that placed feeling in the context of much larger, more purely visual kinds of experience. Though I am writing these words before the opening of "Picasso: The Last Decade," on the basis of the catalogue, my impression is that this show, though it captures the haywire exuberance of the late style, may not, finally, do it justice. I wonder whether the weird force, like frozen fire, of the great *Mother and Child* (included in the Museum of Modern Art retrospective) and of *Kiss I* (October, 1969, reproduced by Malraux and shown in New York at Pace) will not be experienced at the Guggenheim. Beyond this, painting by painting, the Gray/Guggenheim show seems to include versions of compositions that emphasize spontaneity rather than a deeper but no less free kind of resolution. I hope I am wrong.

Most dismaying—and somehow suggestive of a general attitude toward late Picasso—is the choice for the cover of the catalogue, a pastel self-portrait from 1972. In his essay, Schiff relates some anecdotes about this drawing which suggest that Picasso saw in it premonitions of his own end. The pastel itself, if reproduction can be believed at all, finds Picasso—who had such a genius for discovering the beauty in things that others thought ugly—revealing only ugliness. By putting on the cover of the catalogue this messy mix of conventional modeling, scribbling, and inert, heavy lines, the organizers of the show emphasize a self-congratulatory pathos that is the worst, and the least, of the late Picasso.

Picasso's 1971 *Mother and Child,* which hung at the very end of the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective, was the late style at its best. The child, looking out at us through big, scared eyes, sat in his mother's great, enfolding lap. The painting resonated with love and birth—experiences that had found similar form in the mothers and children of the Romanesque age. But Picasso was not so

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much borrowing from the Romanesque as he was inhabiting the same large world of thought and feeling. Like the great Madonna and Child on the Port Royal at Chartres Cathedral (of which it is a younger, Cubist cousin), Picasso's *Mother and Child* reached out to spectators at the 1980 retrospective in a very special way. Most paintings are best seen in small, private rooms; Picasso's late pictures, like the great, public avowals of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, have a different relation to their audience. When I think of the *Mother and Child,* I think of the two people with whom I first came to know it. We saw the *Mother and Child* in the context of—and not exactly in spite of—the crowds that filled the top floor of the Museum of Modern Art that day. It was late afternoon, the Museum was already closing, and as we tried to get in a last, long look the guards were coaxing everyone away, down the stairs.

Malraux's superb description of the 1970 show at the Palais des Papes is as much about the experience of looking at Picasso with other people as it is about the work itself. Inside the Palais des Papes, Malraux hears "ageless cries and shouts, which echoed in from the courtyard, where the Théâtre National Populaire, rehearsing a Cretan tragedy, [seemed] to be acclaiming the Minotaur." He overhears "some hippies discussing the *Couples.* They had understood the sense of rebellion that had motivated the paintings; they had also understood that it wasn't the same as their own. The hippies were dreaming of India, of Buddhism, and of early Christianity, communal and musical." And he then goes on to record, at length, another conversation that he heard, between a group of young radicals. They are arguing heatedly: Is Picasso a revolutionary artist or a bourgeois entertainer? Can art have any relevance at all to revolutionary politics? Malraux, of course, was completely out of sympathy with the students who closed down the schools and took to the streets in 1968, and his rendering of these conversations is rather ironic. But he is too much of a literary artist to engage in mere ridicule. If the group of radicals at the Palais des Papes has framed the questions wrong, it is because they don't know how large the stakes really are. (The hippies seem closer to the truth.) For Malraux, Picasso's tarots are a radical analysis not of bourgeois experience but of the very nature of experience.

In bringing into his portrait of Picasso's last works the hippies and radicals and mystical and political ideas of the late 1960s Malraux shatters the old-masterish glaze some may want to superimpose on them. Malraux's description of the Palais des Papes set me to thinking about the time in which these paintings were created: the late 1960s and early 1970s. These were the years of be-ins, endless luncheons on the grass. In dance halls people moved wildly to a new, free-form kind of pop music. Godard directed *Weekend,* his vision of hell on a modern freeway, and the Living Theater came to the United States with *Paradise Now.* In colleges students were introduced to classical literature through Euripides's *Bacchae,* in which bacchic madness triumphs, finally, over Apollonian reason. The titles of books popular at the time—*Love's Body, Madness and Civilization*—suggest an effort not necessarily to deny civilization but to understand experiences of the mind and the body that culture could not always account for.

It had been almost three-quarters of a century earlier that Picasso had painted *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,* the great voodoo-witchcraft painting that signaled the biggest smash-up in the history of Western art. For Picasso, the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, roughly framed in the terms of the classical and the primitive, had been with him almost from the start. He did not need anyone to show him which way madness lay. Though the sanest of men, he had found new ways to introduce the unconscious into the conscious world of art. For the Surrealists and so many others, he had led the way. In the 1960s the pictorial arts seemed unable to represent the fissures that many sensed in culture; Picasso's late work may bridge the gap. The slightly dazed, Van Gogh-ish young woman in a hat that Picasso

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painted in July, 1971, is pure Picasso, but she might also be a figure sitting on the grass at a be-in held in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco in the late 1960s. And the frenetic lovers of 1969 inhabit the same realm of experience as the people who danced so wildly as the sun came out after the first terrible night of rain at the Woodstock Festival in 1969. Act and art—the dancer and the Picasso painting—are not the same. They embody very different attitudes toward action—they mean different things—but they exist within the same world of feeling. In the 1950s Picasso seemed an old hedonist fading away in the glare of the Mediterranean sun. The work of the last five years reveals a very different man: the wisest bacchant of them all.

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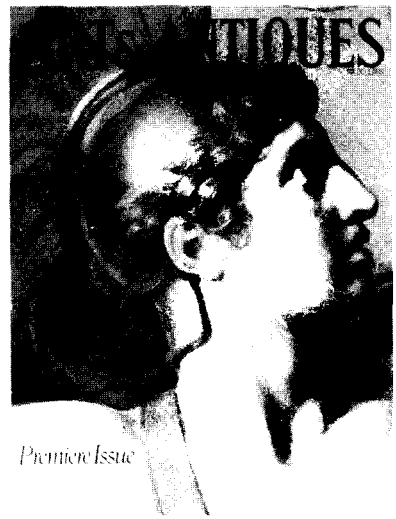

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Music

Les Troyens at the Met

by Jacques Barzun

The choice of Berlioz's musical epic to celebrate the opening of the Metropolitan Opera's one hundredth season was apt. The work has both grandeur and variety of scene, from the sack of a city to poetic love-making, and from religious celebration in monumental architecture to a quiet sunset on the African shore of the Mediterranean. *Les Troyens,* moreover, is one hundred twenty-five years old and thus sufficiently senior to the institution to greet its centenary with dignity, while being, culturally speaking, "of the same age."

The undertaking had practical advantages besides: it was a revival of the American premiere of ten years ago (celebrating the Met's ninetieth season), and the new production could benefit from experience and revisions. A marked improvement was that it now had as conductor James Levine instead of Rafael Kubelik, whose unsuitability was confirmed here in 1973 after his mishandling of the score at Covent Garden two decades earlier. Right rhythm, meter, and tempo are indispensable to Berlioz's music and Mr. Kubelik, with the best will, denatures them steadily and pitilessly.

Mr. Levine, on the contrary, is justly renowned for conducting Mozart, and as Shaw pointed out long ago, Berlioz and Mozart require the same type of exacting musicianship—and rarely get it. In the musical part of *Les Troyens* this time, the regrettable moments were due to inadequate rehearsing and miscasting, both of them chargeable to the Metropolitan tradition of repertory-working and not to Mr. Levine's direction. Indeed, when knowledgeable listeners voiced their impressions on leaving the house, the same remark occurred to all: the music alone held together and made tolerable a self-defeating production. It is the staging and its artistic—or inartistic—implications that I want to discuss.

In general one may fairly say that what most often leads modern producers of plays and operas astray is "ideas." I mean the self-conscious notions that the possessor thinks it necessary, for one reason or another, to carry out in his part of the work. These notions may derive from the conviction that the piece presents uncommon technical problems, or from a tendentious reading of the script, or from the belief that "today's audience" requires something singular, "sophisticated," if it is to swallow the classic. Shakespeare, *Carmen,* even *The Beggar's Opera* have in our time suffered from "ideas." A fine example of the sort is recorded in an exchange between Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Bernard Shaw. She was acting Lady Macbeth and had been given the idea that the role must be played "as if seen through a sheet of glass." She told Shaw about it; his excoriation followed.

There is always for such ideas some remote hint in the work itself. In *Macbeth* it is of course the sleepwalking scene. In the first part of *Les Troyens,* the germ for one of sev-

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eral damaging "ideas" is that, because Troy is doomed to destruction, these first two acts must be played in near-darkness. That was done at Covent Garden in 1969 and it is done again in the present production. The all-purpose set of seven slab-topped pillars, mounted on turntables forming large shallow steps, is cavernous and dim; it effectively blurs the dramatic contrasts, the rapidly shifting moods of that first of two tragedies.

This nocturnal effect prevails from the beginning, although Berlioz opens the drama with a scene of jubilation by the Trojan people. They sing and dance, after ten years of war, on the site of the camp, strewn with debris, that the Greeks have deserted. The spectator should see the citadel to the left, Mt. Ida in the background, and an altar near a riverbank on the right, where Achilles's tomb still has the power to daunt the Trojan populace. The tomb at the Met is the top of the prompter's box. In fact, the spectator sees little but the seven neolithic erections, and the goings-on of the Trojan mob at that place seem motiveless.

The spectator at no point could suspect that Berlioz has conceived every moment of his drama with imaginative care for the smallest details and has concerted words, music, and scene so that they form a perfect unity. His stage directions are explicit and abundant but, as we shall see, as far as the new production goes, they might as well have been written in invisible ink. It may be objected that an author's instructions are sometimes difficult to carry out. Granted, but "sometimes," here and there, is not "throughout." Berlioz was a practical producer of others' operas when he wrote his own, and most of his wishes are simple, even when they are not standard practice. For example, he wants the Trojans to dance and shout and sing joyful ha-ha's for a dozen bars before the curtain rises, so that the gloating over the Greeks will be at its height. It should not open "cold."

The only idea, then, that should govern the entire production is this: Berlioz, adapting Virgil, has given us a tale of two cities, both shown to us at first in happy celebration, both ending in disaster; each the scene of a collective and an individual tragedy through faith misplaced. Troy falls through its excessive piety, Carthage is shattered by the love-betrayal of its queen. It is therefore imperative that we see these cities in their various aspects physically *there*. And the events that bring on ruin must also occur in plain sight.

Events consist of people and things in motion. And the stage, one would have thought, was the place where action was not merely respected but cherished, treasured. Accordingly, Berlioz lavished on his stage play frequent contrasts of mood, dramatic entrances, gripping visual effects, soldiers and sailors in action, interruptions by ghostly voices, thunder, lightning, the crash of falling towers, and the fire both of heaven and of human destroyers—all this in addition to the vocal conflict of human purposes and passions.

Of all this rich fare the Met production deigns to supply but a few crumbs. The direction of persons is static from beginning to end; the scenic effects one would rejoice to call operatic are subdued or suppressed. To begin with, the fateful horse, called Trojan but actually Greek, is missing. True, nobody wants him up front where his proportions or lack of them might challenge belief. But he belongs at the back, crossing the whole stage in a solemn religious procession for which Berlioz has provided the music.

To that music we see instead a series of grotesque animal heads of metal, lolling toward us on tall poles; one of them vaguely resembling a cross between a horse and a boar. Symbolic, no doubt. It may have been so intended, but symbolic it is not, for a true symbol carries its meaning forcefully and, in good stagecraft, unmistakably. These bestiary tintypes fail, just like the Stonehenge scenery.

In any case, symbolism is entirely inappropriate to the epic. It suits best the intimate, individualist drama shot through with fantasy—Berg's *Lulu* or Strauss's *Die Liebe der Danae*. The epic takes place in the harsh, populated outer world; its poetry arises from

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the very disparity between hope of love and glory and the wretchedness of war and death. So *Les Troyens* must be set and directed according to the tradition of realism.

The word is no absolute. There is no need to draw every landscape to scale and make every object an historical replica. But when the Greeks begin to capture Troy it will not do to show us Aeneas, uneasily asleep in his palace, looking as if he were camping out in the woods. He needs near him the lamp that the book specifies, and most of his armor on. Those omissions and the lack of warlike noises in the background make the two irruptions into his chamber—that of his son Ascanius and of Hector's ghost, bloody and disheveled—vapid and pointless; for—odd as it may seem—someone entering a sleeping person's room (especially a ghost) creates tension in the viewer, whereas two indistinct figures circling a camp bed at night arouse nothing but puzzlement. At the end of that scene a great crash from the fighting in the city is called for to waken Aeneas. He wakes up naturally; we almost expect him to stretch and yawn.

If one contrasts this specimen of inadequacy with the earlier, wordless scene of Andromache's laying a wreath on Hector's tomb, holding the child Astyanax by the hand—one of the purest gems of the score and superbly done in this production—one is led to suspect that another "idea" presided over the persistent anti-dynamism of the staging. That idea is: "the classical world." In classical times, everything was beautiful and calm; people moved stately. True, there were wars and such things, but they differed from ours in forming a series of posed tableaux.

Surely, no other scheme accounts for the directing of Cassandra, the prophetess whom none believes, and her fellow victims, the Trojan women. Miss Jessye Norman was making her debut here in the role, and her magnificent voice was on full display, but neither her temperament nor her motions suited her words. Berlioz writes above her part *égarée* (distracted) almost from her first entrance, and when she pleads with whoever will listen not to trust the Greeks, the gods, or anybody else, she should become frantic. Yet no indignant shudder or shriek of fury escaped her till within a couple of minutes of her end.

Likewise with her sisters. They stood in oratorio formation on a raised part of the turntable system and sang admirably. But the equally admirable actions that Berlioz devised for them—their attitudes, poses, and movements; the joy of the willing martyrs who take up lyres and start singing; the small group of cowards, whom Cassandra denounces and who are finally driven off by the rest—all this operatic stuff, you might say, went for naught with the management. The Greek soldiers, too, had evidently been warned backstage not to interrupt the music; they stood there, armed cap-a-pie, a solid mass listening politely, instead of molesting the women in twos and threes and uttering the unseemly thoughts that the naturalistic Berlioz invented for them. And of course, the "tornado of fire" in the city behind them, the crash of the collapsing towers of Ilium, were missing.

One could fill a small book with similar refusals to be dramatic. Near the beginning, to give but one instance, the Trojans' athletic games include a gladiatorial combat. Games and combat were replaced by a ballet. Between Symbolism and Classicism Berlioz's realistic romanticism was blandly eliminated.

Before the public ever had a chance to buy tickets last fall, it was treated in the newspapers to a suspense story three weeks long: would Placido Domingo sing Aeneas? The tessitura, he said, was too high. Then it was reported that he had attended a dress rehearsal. "I'm planning to take the risk." Finally, he was "almost convinced" that he would sing four out of the six scheduled evenings. One reporter wondered why the Spanish tenor was given "such a problematic role."

To herald a once-a-century celebration in this way was not in the best professional style and it indicated a piece of miscasting.

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For Aeneas, who appears briefly in "The Fall of Troy," is a mainstay of "The Trojans at Carthage," half again as long as "The Fall." And mainstay Mr. Domingo was not, in voice or bearing. Having arrived at Dido's court disguised as a shipwrecked sailor with his mates, Aeneas discloses himself in resplendent armor when he is needed to defend the city from barbarian attack. This effective bit showed him diffident and the ensuing farewell to his young son perfunctory.

Nor could the diffidence be due to high tessitura by itself. In the event, Mr. Domingo transposed some half a dozen pages. There was no harm in that; Berlioz has marked in the score a couple of places where Dido may sing some alternative high notes and where the basses may do the same if their voices require. What may have contributed to the timidity of Mr. Domingo's Aeneas was his thick, uncertain French, which acted as a distorting factor in a work where words and music are fused and where the recitatives need the assurance of a regal delivery. The masterly John Vickers showed in earlier productions that there is nothing "problematic" about the part. And I am told that when William Lewis took over the role, the heroic stance did get established. With Jessye Norman shifting to Dido, for which her voice is ideally suited, the whole second part was brought closer to its proper presentation.

Like the first, the second part opens with a people in its glory. Carthage is in the seventh year of its existence and the whole city turns out to fête the capable, inspiring queen. She, in turn, sings the praises of her industrious citizenry and rewards the builders, sailors, and farmers whose labors have created the new commonwealth. This pageantry calls for a parklike setting full of flowers, a daïs with a throne, a grandstand for the people, and a pathway for the parade of the three guilds. For them, Berlioz has written three short marches that are little masterpieces of psychological depiction. But at the Met there was no grandstand and no procession. Serried glee-club ranks replaced a shouting populace and the makers of the Gross National Product were turned into a ballet of boys and girls in white tights. Why they should wind up at the queen's throne and receive small golden objects—sickle, oar, etc.—remained a mystery.

Speaking of white tights, a word must be said about the costuming. At Troy, Priam and his dignitaries wear a pair of stiff panels that makes them look like the "sandwich men" who used to walk the streets encased in advertising placards fore and aft. Cassandra and Aeneas are in nondescript garb, and it was too dark to see if Hector's ghost was properly unkempt in bloodstained tunic and armor. At Carthage, despite prosperity, the queen is reduced to but one dress for the fête, for dalliance in her gardens, and for her funeral pyre. And when the three genuine ballets are performed, the white tights come on again—for the Hindu, the Nubian, and the native slaves.

The scene that follows the jubilee and the Trojan alliance is the famous "Royal Hunt and Storm," familiar to concertgoers but certainly not imagined by them as the essential portion of an opera. The producers of this revival did not conceive it so, either. They played the music curtain down and houselights up. That sufficed to spoil the pastoral opening of the piece, for the audience, taken aback, began to buzz with conversation. It soon ceased, and the abdication of the producers did show one thing to those who did not know the music: it can stand alone, a tight-knit form.

But aside from the incongruity of playing half an act of opera without the required actors, the omission was something like leaving the play-within-a-play out of *Hamlet*: the royal hunt is the episode in which Dido and Aeneas become lovers, having taken refuge in a cave from the storm that scatters the hunting party. What is more, the wood and river sprites and their cries, regrettably absent, represent the forces of nature at work in the event, while the storm serves as an analogue of the love passion. The warring gods, too, join their voices to the glorious hullabaloo with the word "Italy," to remind Aeneas of his duty.

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Of course, the mise-en-scène written out by the composer would have required recognizable pieces of scenery: a reed-fringed stream and a cave; some gear or other for the naiads and satyrs; Ascanius and other hunters in suitable attire; and Dido herself dressed as Diana and carrying a bow and arrow (to mark her chastity when she first appears). No doubt such an outlay ran counter to the austerity decreed for the public-spirited queen; and so would the thunder, darkness split by lightning, and the tree struck and catching fire.

The next situation is embowered in Dido's gardens by the sea, at sunset. After a duet between the queen's sister and the chief minister expressing political and moral anxiety, Dido and her lover, his son, and the court poet, sing a sequence celebrating nature and the sea (in the magical septet). These and other peaceful feelings work up to the great scene of love and tender reproaches when the royal pair is left alone. By that time it is moonlight. Hence the lighting should progress from sun to twilight to the glowing moon. All this may have been provided; it was not observable. What could be discerned in the bluish haze was the unrestful posture of the principals singing as in a concert, where the luxury of couches and state furnishings would be out of place. And the one "operatic" touch was jarring: Dido asks her poet to sing about the charms of rural life "something simple and soft." The lovely melody is accompanied *piano* and *pianissimo* to the very end. Yet as rendered, the close of the last stanza rang out with the volume of a song of triumph.

From this serene midpoint, the drama moves toward the tragic denouement in sharply contrasted scenes. First, Mercury appears (supposedly in a ray of moonlight) and strikes Aeneas's shield to recall him to his duty—to sail for Italy and found Rome. But in the harbor, the Trojan soldiers and sailors do not see the necessity. Hylas, the young sailor on watch in the rigging, is homesick and utters a heartrending plaint that matches in pathos the Andromache music of "The Fall." Unfortunately, Hylas could hardly be heard: he was singing offstage. Clearly, the symbolic all-metal ships (prows only) had only symbolic rigging, which even a young sailor could not climb. The result was poor coordination between the muffled song and the orchestra and the spoiling of the tapering close, when Hylas falls asleep before finishing. Instead of fading, the voice just stopped.

The darkness, though, was very well done. What it lacked was the army's lights and the tents from which Aeneas is supposed to rally his forces; he has been roused to action by a small committee of shades, headed by Priam. As they gang up on Aeneas, the old king's head should glow with a quivering aureole that vanishes as he redescends to the netherworld. Of all this, nothing. Aeneas stomps about calling "to arms" toward the wings and the aluminum ships behind him. But do not despair: the one moment of action granted us is at hand. The martial chorus with cries of "Italy!" troops off and the semicircle of five ships slip their moorings visibly and back away—in five different directions.

Dido, having learned the news, comes before us, wild with grief and fury. Her imprecations ended, she bids farewell to Carthage and to life; after which we are booked to return to the gardens, where a funeral pyre has been built and where two altars for the priests are also specified. Berlioz has written out the death scene in detail, to conform to the ancient ritual—the bared left foot, the hair undone, and so on. He even gives his sources, not alone in Virgil, but in Ovid and Horace. The strangeness of the procedure adds one more dramatic stroke, provided the heroine and the props are close enough to be seen, that the "greenish flames" flicker sinisterly, and that the blue horizon is there to keep us thinking at once of Italy and of the dying queen's prophecy of revenge: Hannibal! Hannibal! We heard but had no chance to see, neither at this point nor at the very end, where the poem calls for a sky-bright vision—a mirage of the future Roma, showing the Capitol, the emperor and his legions, and his entourage of poets and artists.

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To recite damaging deficiencies as I have done is a painful task, and it would not be justified if the work, the opera house, and the occasion were ordinary ones. Routine doings are flawed by their very nature but excusable by their modest claims. The present affair must be judged otherwise: a spokesman for the Met declared the production "as complete as has ever been given." And since to the majority of opera-goers *Les Troyens* is a brand-new work, its systematic mutilation, however unwitting, is a disservice to the public, let alone to the creator. Here is a work replete with scenes, gestures, incidents, atmospheres unparalleled in the rest of the repertory, bringing to our imagination a new world of history and poetry, myth and ritual, and nearly every visual object and spatial arrangement designed to convey those artistic inventions is left out or dimmed by abstractions. It is the negation of art and of opera in one stroke.

"Ah, but if the music is so dramatically apt that it kept the work together as one whole, why does malproduction matter so much?" The answer is simple: pleasurable perception in the arts as in life depends on coherence in the mode and the means. *Les Troyens* is just as moving in a concert performance as it can be on the opera stage. Those who heard John Nelson conduct the work at Carnegie Hall years ago, when Beecham fell ill during rehearsals, will testify to that fact. But with the music by itself the imagination, receiving its stimulus through one sense alone, concentrates upon that. When a second sense is solicited by any staging whatever, the imagination is fed on two levels and these must be congruent, not disparate. Nor is it that in the concert hall one is busy mentally adding scenery, costume, and movement; the thought of them never occurs; the experience is complete without them. Thus one can admire the beauty of a woman and feel the force of her personality from a portrait in oils, a miniature, a black-and-white photograph; or again, from seeing her across the room or sitting next to her, hearing her voice and breathing in her perfume. But mix modes—put a real jewel on the painting or a voice recording behind the photograph—and you discompose the imagination.

That explains why the "Royal Hunt and Storm" is given concert-fashion shocks at the opera, even when the rest is staged "symbolically" or rather, halfheartedly. If anyone thinks *Les Troyens* presents insurmountable difficulties, the idea should be dismissed. Whoever can put on a full-blooded *Aïda* can put on *Les Troyens.* Nor is length an obstacle. The work is shorter than the uncut *Tristan.* Berlioz, who left nothing to chance, timed the whole, with four fifteen-minute intermissions, at four hours and twenty-six minutes. The current production is in three acts instead of five—a good plan, which should permit either saving two intervals or adding time to the remaining two. Besides, the second Carthage ballet could be done with fewer repeats at no loss to the work. Where then do the five hours go? One is surprised that the modern scene-switching machinery and the paucity of accessories do not make for quicker changes. They order these things better at Santa Fe.

At the other self-commemoration organized by the Met—a galaxy of stars singing famous arias—a woman of distinction who attended was quoted as saying that *Les Troyens* was "not everybody's opera." She was quite right. It is one of a small number—*Orpheus and Eurydice, Don Giovanni, Fidelio, Freischütz*—which in one way or another range beyond the postulates of regular opera; they are as *King Lear* to a well-made play. In consequence, these works cannot be assimilated instantly through the discovery of a pleasant mixture of fresh and familiar features. *Les Troyens* is beginning to be known and enjoyed, the music having won its audience by ear. It now remains to unfold the drama fittingly for the eye. The story, though a couple of thousand years old, is still worth *seeing.*

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Art

The resurrection of the *Last Supper*

by Creighton Gilbert

A joint venture by Olivetti, Polaroid, and Queen Elizabeth II is not something one could have anticipated, but when the object of attention is Leonardo's *Last Supper,* the cooperation is not difficult to understand. That painting is so undeniably an elemental rock of culture that even those observers who might otherwise suspect self-interest in a project of this sort are likely to accept the homage as sincere. The result, at any rate, could be seen recently at the National Gallery of Art in an exhibition entitled "Leonardo's *Last Supper*: Before and After," which features photographs of the recent restoration of the *Last Supper* and Leonardo's preparatory sketches for the painting.[1]

Olivetti was the first to become involved in the project, by financing the current work being done on the painting. Behind its decision, I presume, is the figure of Carlo Bertelli, the art historian whose job includes official responsibility for the painting, along with the rest of government-owned cultural property in Milan. Bertelli has won exceptional respect from his peers for the energy, not to mention the intelligence, of his approach to the enormous problems that face him. Thus a visitor to Milan's main museum, the Brera, is not only shown its treasures on the walls but also lesser pictures stored on racks (and viewed through glass partitions) and paintings in the process of restoration, laid out on tables with explanatory labels that include even figures on cost. These kinds of displays not only appeal to the public's inevitable nosiness about what's going on behind the scenes, but they also offer the sort of accountability about decision-making that open-meeting laws do. More important, they are a teaching device. It used to be that the static museums of Europe looked to America for educational techniques, but in this case, it seems, it is we who should look to them. A few museums elsewhere have something similar to the display of works in storage, but none I think similar to the second kind of display.

The conservation of the *Last Supper* is being presented to the public in just this way. Far from being "closed for repairs," its room, the old dining hall of a Dominican convent, is as full of visitors as ever. Only the scaffolding is a variant, and even access to that is not limited to the conservation staff. All kinds of people are invited up, not only to look but to take photographs. These photographs will supplement the thousands being taken for the official record, which will show what is being done at every stage of restoration.

Basic to the project is the principle of reversibility that is now part of the ethics of conservation. Only twenty years ago work of this kind on old master paintings was done

1 "Leonardo's *Last Supper*: Before and After" is at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., from December 18 through March 4. The drawings will travel from there to Toronto, Sydney, and Amsterdam.

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without any published report, sometimes even without a written log. The present approach inspires more confidence. Not only can the new paint be removed later, if that is desired—it is a form of watercolor—but the constant presence of the public, including professionals, allows for plenty of scrutiny before the project is finished. If critics don't speak up now, when the process is still fluid, they are hardly entitled to complain about the results later. Indeed, revision is already happening. When, during the current campaign, a millimeter square of different original color was discovered under old repaint —providing a clue to a previously misunderstood gesture—that area was done over.

Among the photographers is Polaroid. This company has used the *Last Supper* for a second trial run of one of its recent developments, a huge camera that produces instant pictures the actual size of the thing being photographed. A series of such pictures can give us a facsimile of the *Last Supper* on film. Polaroid's first trial was with the newly cleaned *Transfiguration* altarpiece by Raphael in the Vatican. It was regarded by some viewers as virtually perfect, indistinguishable, at ten paces, from the original. But others found the problems of distortion through enlargement, however well handled, minor when compared to those of color, which they considered to be still unsolved. When I saw the Polaroid *Transfiguration* in America I was much impressed but less so when, after getting used to it in repeated viewings, I went back and looked at the original in the Vatican. The Polaroid was too blue. The original allows for stronger autonomous areas of local color. This difference is not the result of poor photography, but the result of the camera eye registering the floodlighting and filters. The human eye's capacity to block out some undesired factors of physical perception is evidently the key.

The Polaroid *Last Supper* strikes me as too black, but I want to check that impression again in Milan. What it does show the world is the development so far of the cleaning, and that is pretty wonderful. It has concentrated on the three figures furthest to the right, which have long been understood to be the least damaged. When I saw these in Milan last May, I was astonished. What is striking is not so much the changes to a more precise contour line and a less sentimental facial modeling, which the conservators proudly point out, though these are real. It is the big shift in color. The painting is no longer a continuum of murky glooms, from which the figures fight their way forward with only partial success, like swimmers in an oil slick. Along with the new lines and modeling, the color areas now give each person definition as a free actor. The action itself is one of bold physical choreography. Both muscles and feelings register with specificity and focus. In a cleaned-up, brighter world, the people in the painting are not impeded from managing their immediate intentions.

This depiction by Leonardo is simply a slight, if very personal, variation on the usual theme of the Renaissance painters, whose double rediscovery of the world and of man is most concentrated in images of a few human beings in a drama, so that physical truth of the world validates the emotional truth of personal relations, especially at instants of dramatic climax. It is because the *Last Supper* now more precisely represents Renaissance art that the conservators' findings are so convincing to the art historian. But they prompt a worry, too. Whatever happened to the famous sfumato, the fine shadow that covers up edges? Its existence is not a myth. Leonardo's own jottings—most obviously his advice to painters to work in a courtyard on a cloudy day between walls painted black—make this certain. The dim worlds of other paintings by Leonardo, starting with the altarpiece he painted in Milan nearest in date to the *Last Supper* and continuing to later works, support the same conclusion. And so more broadly does the darkened atmosphere of paintings by his imitators, starting in Milan at the same time and continuing to, indeed, Raphael's *Transfiguration.* The bright *Last Supper* instead connects with what Leonardo had produced in his first years, in the studio of his mentor

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Verrocchio, as well as with the painting of his own generation in Florence, even of Botticelli.

To see bright strength in the painting of the *Last Supper* is entirely in keeping with our sense that in history things happen in context, without sudden, unprepared reversals. On the other hand, it is hard to reconcile our new perception with another well-established phenomenon in history: that a crowd of imitators refers to an innovator. The soft gray bodies in the paintings of Leonardo's admirers everywhere, starting in Milan, cannot be explained as their own idea.

We are lucky to be able to look at some of Leonardo's preparatory sketches and other related drawings, most of which belong to the royal heritage at Windsor. The impressiveness of the work being done in Milan apparently persuaded their curators to lend them for a touring exhibition, the first stop of which was the room with the painting. Two especially famous drawings for the heads of two disciples—perhaps Queen Elizabeth's most valuable property—are certainly by Leonardo's hand. The conservators have observed, and everyone else has agreed, that they are a help in the cleaning: the cleaned painted heads turn out to resemble the drawings more closely than the dirty ones did. It is a graphic illustration of the wrongness of the procedure used by the older restorers, who added new forms where there were losses, going beyond the actual lost areas to make whole new faces. Conspicuously, the drawings, and not just the two key ones, have clean contour lines and firm masses. Thus they too make us accept the new cleaning, and confirm the broader pattern it has revealed.

At its second stop, in Washington, the exhibition of drawings was joined by the Polaroid facsimile of the painting and by an exhibition of works by other artists that reflect the *Last Supper*. On this occasion, Olivetti funded a symposium of Leonardo experts, who offered a wide variety of interpretive studies about the *Last Supper*. Of special value were the reports of Bertelli and Pinin Brambilla, the chief conservator at work. So far as we know, the first big effort to "restore" the painting was in the early eighteenth century; it was followed by half a dozen others. Usually, each restorer first undid—at first with great difficulty—the work of the previous one, and then produced a new painting in his own taste. Much more acceptably, the campaign of circa 1950 concentrated on making the paint stick to the wall. But much of this paint was old restoration.

Was the murky *Last Supper* a product of the eighteenth-century reworking? One is tempted to think so, if only by analogy. The other great cleaning campaign now going on is giving a similar bright strength to one section of the Sistine Ceiling, the series of the Ancestors of Christ. Their dimness had been supposed to represent Michelangelo's intention. In fact, a famous analysis called this part of the work "The Sphere of Shadow and Death." But the figures were simply dirty. An elegant demonstration of what happened was revealed in the cleaning, when a few dark spots were found. Here bits of paint that had once fallen away had been replaced by restorers in the eighteenth century in colors harmonious with those around them. By then the painting was already very dirty, however, and the restorers took the badly darkened colors to be the true colors. It would not be strange if something similar had happened in the case of the *Last Supper*.

But then what of the other dim works of Leonardo, starting with the altarpiece in the Louvre of the *Virgin of the Rocks*? Are these also affected by similar restorations? Undoubtedly they received similar treatment, yet recent cleaning has left them not so changed. Should we perhaps consider that Leonardo worked differently in different media, that it was in oil on panels that he worked in the novel way his admirers followed, while in murals he did not, adhering more to tradition? Mural painting of the time, mostly in fresco, was especially notable for its translucency and brilliance. It is known that Leonardo steered away from the

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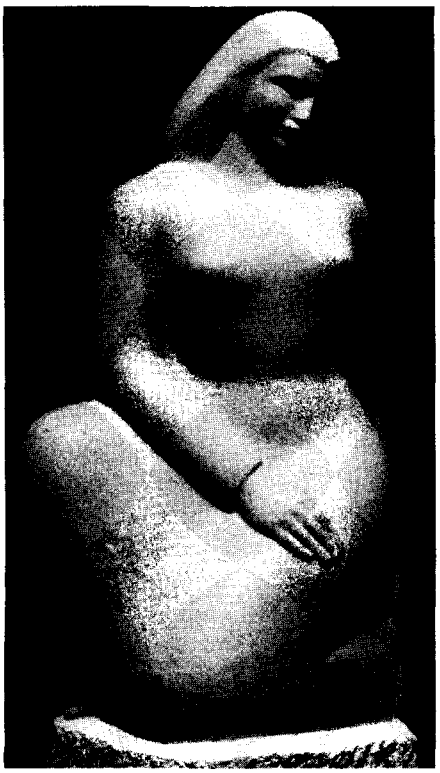
fresco method because it required rapid execution. Leonardo's slowness with the *Last Supper* was so extreme that it produced most of the anecdotes about the work. It has been surmised that he used an encaustic or an oil technique, the latter of which would indeed have favored the infinite gradations of shadow that can be found elsewhere in Leonardo's work. Unfortunately, chemical analysis tells us a lot about his pigments but nothing at all about his binder.

Or perhaps the answer is less dramatic, a combination of these and other explanations. The Leonardo of popular fame, the first man to notice all kinds of things, is real, but least so in his painting. His great respect for the workshop tradition that preceded him in Florence is beyond doubt. He evolved and expanded ideas and procedures about space and perspective rather than overturned them. Just as historians do today, he considered his greatest predecessor to be Masaccio, a painter who had indeed innovated an imagery where figures are helped to move by the diminution of contour lines to an imperceptible edge but where, nonetheless, the force of local hue underpins the precision of human drama. Or it may be along still other lines that the re-revealed mural will resolve our curiosity while it is also, as no one could have expected, even further heightening our admiration.



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Theater

The American Stoppard

by Mimi Kramer

"Well, what do you think?" said the woman to my right. "Did she have it off or didn't she?" I put some sugar in my coffee and said I thought she probably hadn't.

We were discussing the new Tom Stoppard play. Since *The Real Thing* opened here in January at the Plymouth Theater I have had a number of animated conversations about Henry and Annie's marriage, Henry being the hero of *The Real Thing* (Jeremy Irons) and Annie (Glenn Close) the wife who is giving him such a hard time. That Glenn Close is "being unfaithful" to Jeremy Irons in some capacity is never really in question in these debates: the issue is simply whether or not she actually commits adultery. The play leaves it ambiguous.

The playwright husband and his actress wife have quarreled twice: once (early on) about jealousy, a feeling that Henry seems never to experience, to Annie's annoyance, and later over a bad play that Annie wants her husband to rescue and rewrite because it was written in a good cause. Henry, not convinced of the merits of the cause and feeling anyway that good intentions do not redeem bad literature, refuses. Annie, when next seen, is doing a stint of provincial theater up north and rebuffing the attentions of a pretty young actor named Billy, who has no higher opinion of the bad play than Henry, but no objections to acting in it if doing so will keep him near Annie. When Annie returns to London suspiciously late and Henry accuses her of having an affair with Billy, Annie denies it. In a later scene, however, we learn that Annie has, at length, won both her battles: she has succeeded in making Henry jealous; and Henry, fearful of losing her to a younger man with less "fastidious tastes," has agreed to rewrite the bad play.

This last is the controversial scene. Annie has a speech in which she seems to be justifying herself for some sort of involvement with the young actor. But the scene ends with Henry, alone on stage, appealing to an absent Annie: "Oh please, please, please, please don't." On the one hand, Annie's apologia suggests that she is having a fling; on the other, it seems pointless to end a scene on a note of dramatic suspense over an event that has already taken place. Hence the controversy: Did she or didn't she? Almost invariably the men I talk to think that she did, while the women insist that she did not, and discussion is apt to become heated. In the present instance two guests who had seen the play began acting out the crucial scene for the benefit of those who had not, two of whom (a husband and wife with differing interpretations) left the party on unfriendly terms.

The controversy over Annie's behavior is interesting for a number of reasons. Inevitably the phrase "Did she or didn't she?" comes up and "Did she or didn't she?" is actually a line out of the play. It occurs in a context, moreover, which ought to make one feel rather skittish about the whole con-

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versation. The phrase is coined by the hero's teenaged daughter in an attempt to express the utter vacuousness of plays (like the ones Henry writes) that make questions of marital fidelity the primary focus of theater. "Did she have it off or didn't she?" says the daughter, sarcastically. "What a crisis." By rights, anyone who has seen the play ought to blush violently when this phrase comes up in conversation and begin casting around for some topic of greater moment. At the very least, the conversation ought to take on an element of self-conscious irony. But no one ever seems to get the joke.

The fact that no one does—indeed the fact that I keep having this conversation at all—suggests to me that *The Real Thing* has changed a lot since it first opened in London over a year ago. I saw the Mike Nichols production here, and I saw its counterpart in London, directed by Peter Wood, with Roger Rees as Henry and Felicity Kendal as Annie. I remember the London production vividly and the many arguments it inspired: Was it a great play or mediocre? Did it all hang together? What, if anything, was it really about? I don't remember a single conversation about whether or not she had "had it off." I don't remember thinking about it at all. In New York, however, that is what the audience talks about.

One explanation for this is clear: the hero of the play at the Plymouth Theater is a wimp. "He's a wimp!" someone always says. The question of Annie's adultery comes up in an attempt to assess the extent of Henry's wimpiness: one wants to know just how far wrong she done him. But the hero of the Stoppard play in London wasn't a wimp at all. He spoke the same lines (on the whole) and put up with the same amount of unhappiness from his wife; but the Henry played by Roger Rees was effectively a different person from the hero of the Stoppard play on Broadway.

The character played by Roger Rees, like the character played by Jeremy Irons, was baffled and helpless over his wife's activities; but you never found yourself wondering what his problem was or flicking a mental wrist at him disparagingly ("Aw, hell, the guy's a wimp!"). Instead you understood his problem, felt for his predicament. Annie had got him where he lived: not below the belt but above the ears. Ideas were what Henry cared about and Annie was making it painfully clear that in her mind another, younger man's ideas were of a value and importance equal to Henry's. Roger Rees, like Jeremy Irons, became very unhappy indeed in Act II; but never for a moment did he seem the least bit pathetic—not even sitting on the floor in his bathrobe waiting for Annie to come home. Jeremy Irons, by contrast, doesn't need to sit on the floor: he is pathetic playing the scene from the sofa.

Henry, as played by Roger Rees, was a rather cantankerous man approaching middle age who cared passionately about certain things—grammar, clear thinking, the meanings of words—and who desperately wanted the women he loved (his second wife and his daughter) to see the world his way. Which was a shame, really, as neither of them did. And since neither of them thought much of the plays he wrote either, and since Henry was getting on (he ages two years in the course of the play), you minded somehow that Henry for all his cantankerousness seemed sentenced to a life of poetic justice.

Jeremy Irons is about thirty-five years old. So is Roger Rees. But Roger Rees is a first-rate actor. The character he played actually seemed old enough to have a teenaged daughter and to age a couple of years that evening. Where Roger Rees succeeded in creating a real character, a man whom you felt you knew so well by the end of the evening that a certain course of action (which on the part of anyone else might have been questionable) was completely understandable to you, Jeremy Irons manages merely to impersonate an amusing and articulate Englishman (of about thirty-five) who has good comic timing and witty perceptions about contemporary life. Where Roger Rees cared so deeply about things that he seemed, at times, almost unable to stop talking, Jeremy Irons simply stands around making speeches—like a character in a play.

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There is one other important difference between the two Henries. Both are married to acerbic women named Charlotte in Act I, and each leaves his wife for a woman named Annie. But where the London Henry's second wife was a sexy, feisty, passionate woman given to bouts of anger and messy thinking, the New York Henry in Act II is married to Glenn Close.

The character of Annie is the nearest thing I can find to a flaw in Stoppard's play. Slightly underwritten and unsympathetic to begin with, Annie is a problem. Because she causes Henry a good bit of pain and because she is full of silly ideas, it is hard to see what Henry sees in her. Since she comes very close to humiliating him—driving him to take part in a project he finds meretricious—it might be hard to understand why he would go on loving her. What chemistry drew the Macbeths together? How could someone like Jason be important to Medea? Who would give Malfi for the Duchess's Antonio? The literature of the stage is full of relationships that give one pause. What makes these marriages "work"—from an audience's point of view—is the actor's ability to create a plausible presence, to inhabit an empty space on stage and make it appear lived in.

Glenn Close has given a lot of serious thought to the character of Annie. Glenn Close, in fact, is one woman who thinks that Annie does commit adultery. In a recent interview with *The Wall Street Journal* she aired some of her views on the character she plays. As the interviewer explains,

> what turns some audiences against [Annie] is that she commits adultery with a younger man while telling her husband she still loves him. What rankles Miss Close is that she thinks Annie is terrific and wants audiences to like her too. "I love Annie," she says. *The Real Thing* has made her think a lot about women, she says, because she wants the audience to like Annie.

I am delighted that Glenn Close is happy in the role of Annie; I want everyone to be happy. But without bearing the actress any ill will, I can't help thinking that *wanting the audience to like Annie* is not Glenn Close's job. And somehow I can't get rid of the notion that *loving Annie* and *thinking Annie is terrific* should not have interfered with her job. As a private individual Glenn Close is as much entitled to her feelings and opinions as the next woman; as an actress, however, in the service of a play, her job was not to make Annie sympathetic but to make her understandable to an audience by projecting a believable persona, creating a real-seeming character with recognizable feelings and motivations. If her own feelings as a woman helped Glenn Close to do that, well, that was Glenn Close's business. But as a professional actress, *loving Annie* was, strictly speaking, no business of hers.

That Glenn Close made it her business is a mark of her incompetence. (That she was allowed to is a mark of Mike Nichols's.) Here again, the London production succeeded where the New York production failed. Felicity Kendal is no actress of towering greatness, but she is a veteran of the British stage: she knows how to create the illusion of a real woman where none exists. Glenn Close is not a veteran of the British stage, which makes it all the more to her credit that she is able to give a passable imitation of the British stage-wife. But Glenn Close could no more create a real person on a stage than she could give birth to an elk. All she can do is trot out an anglicized version of the same role she always plays: The Ideal Woman of the Eighties, earth mother with an attaché case. It is a serviceable performance: it passes the time and allows Close to feed Jeremy Irons his cues. But it offers no source of human motivation, only a point of view. What point of view?

> It's role reversal, [Close] says. If the husband went out and had an affair in the second act and it were the wife by the hearth crying out in pain, well, that would be business as usual . . . . "I think it's important to remember that the play was written by a man," Miss Close says with a small sample of her face-crinkling grin.

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Glenn Close is not an unintelligent woman; at times, though, she talks an awful lot like one. Indeed, at times she talks an awful lot like Annie. But that's the point, really: her performance is purely a function of the fact that she likes Annie, where it should have been dictated by the requirements of the play.

Hoping to make her sympathetic to an audience, Glenn Close gives us an Annie who is calm and dispassionate—in control. By doing so she in fact robs us of any chance of sympathizing with the character. That face-crinkling grin, I think, is her biggest liability: she goes through the play scattering small samples of it like those ciphers on the first floor of Bloomingdale's. "You rotter!" she beams. "I hate you," she grins. Where Felicity Kendal stormed and swore at her husband ("You pig!" "I'll smash you one! It's you who's bigoted."), Glenn Close simply grins. It is the benign smile of a character with complete moral ascendancy. But Annie hasn't got moral ascendancy and the source of her fury at Henry in this scene is that she knows it. That is why Felicity Kendal could take Annie, in a matter of seconds, from rage ("I hate you.") to open supplication ("Oh Hen . . . can't you help?"). But the New York audience, groping its way through the blinding beams of Glenn Close's face-crinkling grin, could find no trace of any of the things that *really* make Annie sympathetic: her rage at Henry's arrogant superiority and her sense of being menaced by his ability always to have the last word—even when the sentences are hers. Where was Glenn Close's sympathy with women when Henry informs Annie that he can have his way with her whether she's conscious or not? ("I thought I'd try it without you talking.") It's a joke, sure; but, in London, Felicity Kendal's suppressed anger, skillfully registered, gave the ensuing quarrel some context. Glenn Close in this scene was unperturbed: "You didn't really, did you?" she smiled, as though her husband had just told her he'd left all the groceries for *her* to unpack.

It is a good fight, the one that Henry and Annie have in Act II over the bad play. "I can deal with idiots, and I can deal with sensible argument, but I don't know how to deal with you," says Henry. "Where's my cricket bat?" In London, when Roger Rees came back with his cricket bat you really thought that he was going to hit her:

> Annie: Are you trying to be funny?
> Henry: No, I'm serious.
> Annie: You better not be.
> Henry: Right, you silly cow—
> Annie: Don't you bloody dare—

Where was Glenn Close's vaunted sympathy with women in that exchange? Where was her sympathy with Annie? "Don't you bloody dare," she giggled, beaming. And what about the play that Henry never wrote for her? The essence of the quarrel scene is there, surely, in one small thing that Annie says at the end. I still remember the way Felicity Kendal read the line: "You never wrote mine," she said, and suddenly you knew what all the talk about the bad play had really been about. Where was Glenn Close's sympathy for Annie then? And more to the point, where was her sympathy for the play?

As a general rule, a facile performance from an actor does more harm to a production than good. The New York production of *The Real Thing* suffered from the inability of its stars to portray any character but themselves. The less complex and recognizable Henry and Annie became, the more baffling became the nature of their marriage. In fact, the performances of Irons and Close turned Henry and Annie into a stereotypical British stage-couple. Unfortunately, for the hero and heroine of *The Real Thing* that was the last thing in the world you wanted.

The Real Thing is a play about theater. Specifically, it is a play about a particular kind of theater: the drawing-room comedy, the kind of play in which conversation sparkles and nice people sit around worrying about who is being unfaithful to whom. This is in fact the kind of play Henry writes.

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The Real Thing becomes a drawing-room comedy, or something like it, but not before it has launched a series of attacks on the nature, value, and purpose of the genre as a whole.

Among the cases made against Henry's brand of theater, the most formidable are the objection (raised by Henry's first wife) that drawing-room comedy is artificial, bearing no resemblance to "real life," and the objection (raised by his daughter) that nobody really cares much about questions of infidelity. *The Real Thing* is a *tour de force*: having suggested that you shouldn't care about did-she-or-didn't-she, the play brings you to a point where you find that you *do* care. In this Stoppard's play strongly resembles S. N. Behrman's *No Time For Comedy,* another self-referential drawing-room comedy about a playwright who is forced to confront the value of his genre. But *The Real Thing* is more artful than Behrman's 1938 comedy. For one thing Stoppard defends the genre against a more sophisticated series of arguments than Behrman's how-can-you-write-sparkling-comedy-when-people-are-dying-in-Spain variety. For another, Stoppard goes beyond the presentation of arguments. Finally, what makes *The Real Thing* a better play is that the vindication of the genre comes about not because of what somebody says on stage but because of what you, the spectator, actually see, feel, and experience.

In London, the first thing you experienced was a trick: the opening scene (a husband accuses his wife of infidelity) was a scene in a play—and not the one you had come to see. You didn't know this, of course, so you were fooled. Unless, of course, you had read the reviews, in which case you were fooled anyway. Even if you knew that the first scene was a play, you experienced a moment of confusion, for the dialogue of the *second* scene was misleading. The second scene could easily be another scene in the same play-within-a-play, so you didn't realize immediately that the second scene was now "reality." And since there was no qualitative difference between the performances of the actors in "reality" and those of the actors in the play-within-a-play, the only thing you had to go on in distinguishing "theater" from "real life" was what you actually *saw*. In the second scene of the London production, when Henry's first wife said something like, "That's the difference between plays and real life . . ." you had to hand it to her: the woman was right! Real life *was* different from theater; you'd just been noticing that yourself! In the London production, moreover, each set was reminiscent of an earlier set and Carl Tom's slowly rising scrim-panels invited you to peer closely at the stage and notice details. As the action in the play began to mirror the action in Henry's play, you found further confirmation of the fact that what happens in the theater bears small resemblance to what happens in real life; on the other hand, there had been that moment when you were fooled. The London audience had occasion to think about the way illusions can be made to resemble reality, and to wonder whether that is a good or bad thing.

The New York audience was not so lucky. The cluttered and claustrophobic sets in the Broadway production seemed to serve no function at all: they appeared and disappeared beautifully, yes, but with enough money you can, I think, make just about anything disappear. The New York sets offered an audience no visual confirmation whatsoever. Confirmation of what? a member of the New York audience might well ask. There was no opening trick in the New York production: it was clear from the moment the curtain went up that you were watching a play-within-a-play. Since the man on stage was wearing a dressing gown over his clothes and sat, stage center, making speeches to a woman standing thirty degrees behind him, the first scene in the New York production looked as artificial as the one in the London production had looked natural. Add to this the fact that the acting in the second scene seemed almost equally artificial and you have a New York audience headed for a real letdown.

The Real Thing was a very funny play in London. One of the things that made it so

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funny was that you kept running into people you thought you knew: the characters you met at the Strand Theatre were variations on certain real-life "types." You *knew* Henry lounging in his rugby shirt and sneakers, or you knew the kind of man who does; you knew his daughter Debbie, with her super-short "rad-fem" haircut and her North London accent, the kind of lower-class accent affected by upper-middle-class teenagers who have been to expensive schools. You could picture everything about the lives of these people—where they lived, what schools they went to, where they had summer houses, what they thought and said—because they were all subtle caricatures of real-life stereotypes that you met every day outside the theater. The London production of *The Real Thing* provided a real field day for anyone who had ever wanted to poke gentle fun at what *The Guardian* calls the "creative and media" people at play.

What Mike Nichols had to do for the American production was to decide what aspects of the play would be meaningless to a New York audience and consequently ineffective in a Broadway theater. He looked at Henry's rugby shirt and Garrick Club tie and realized (rightly) that they would fail to amuse a New York audience. He looked at Henry's daughter and, noting her haircut and her way of speaking, realized that the satiric force of such idiosyncrasies would be lost on Broadway. Mike Nichols is a master of comedy and he knows when not to chase a laugh. So he took Henry out of his rugby shirt and dressed him instead in corduroy trousers and an Oxford shirt; and he fitted out Henry's daughter with a navy blue cardigan and an English public-school accent to match. What Nichols failed to notice was that Henry's rugby shirt and Debbie's accent had made them realistic to a London audience as "types" from a world outside the theater, offering a contrast to the pasteboard artificiality of the stage-figures in the first scene. Realizing this, Nichols might have combed through the minutiae of American upper-middle-class-trendy for some realistic equivalents that would have effected the same contrast between theater and real life that the London production achieved. As it was, he replaced realistic detail with artificial generalization. Visually Henry has become a typical drawing-room comedy hero, clothed in the second scene almost exactly as the stage-husband of the first scene was costumed in the London production. And if the stage-husband of the London production had had a daughter, she would have been dressed exactly as Henry's daughter was dressed in New York.

The London production of *The Real Thing* made the play significantly better than your average drawing-room comedy, better even than your average drawing-room comedy *about* drawing-room comedy. The audience in London left the theater thinking about illusion and reality and why plays should be about fidelity and love. But an audience for the New York production of *The Real Thing* left the theater wondering whether Annie had or had not "had it off."

The other day I came very close, I think, to an answer about whether or not she did. I happened to call the press agent for *The Real Thing* with a question about the production. As it happened, my question was referred to the director himself, for while I was calling Mike Nichols rang on another line. Things were evidently hopping around the press office. There was trouble about the artwork for the window cards and Glenn Close was asking for a script change. It seems she had finally twigged to the fact that Annie is an unsympathetic character and she wanted to restore a line that shows how nice she is. I think perhaps this unexpected brush with literature-in-the-making must have turned my head a little, for I had a sudden wild idea. "Wait a minute! Put Mr. Nichols on!" I would bark excitedly into the phone, and when I had him there, "Mr. Nichols," I would say, "there's one question I've got to ask you, just one thing I've simply got to know: Did she or didn't she?" What a funny joke that would be, I thought. But as I put the receiver down, I had a sudden misgiving: I wasn't absolutely sure that Mike Nichols would get it.

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Letter from London

Treason in season

by Herb Greer

> You . . . are wrong to disturb the peace . . . and not to rest content with the fine state that is yours. If you knew how everyone hates you, your hair would stand on end.

These words have a familiar resonance for an American living in Europe today. They might have been read intact from a banner at Greenham Common (an unusually literate banner), or quoted verbatim from any number of British TV chat shows or newspaper comments after the operation in Grenada. In fact, they are part of a letter written by the Duke of Milan in the fifteenth century and addressed to the rising Republic of Venice, which at the time was attracting the envious hostility of other Italian states and of powerful governments in Europe. There are tempting parallels here which I will not explore, because the real context of the passage is on this occasion not political.

The quotation occurs in the catalogue of a brilliant exhibition at the Royal Academy, *The Genius of Venice 1500-1600*. It covers a period in which Venice had survived the hatred of the censuring Duke, come through a military disaster or two, and established a rich empire in Northern Italy and around the Adriatic. Its influence was pushed throughout the Mediterranean basin and acknowledged—if not generally loved—by the great powers to the north and east and on the peninsula. Along with political and commercial eminence there developed a patronage and connoisseurship of the arts, both religious and secular, which sponsored some of the finest work of the Italian Renaissance. With the help of the Sea Containers Group (which owns the Venice Simplon-Orient Express), a generous sampling of this has been assembled in the galleries of the Royal Academy to make up the greatest exhibition of sixteenth-century Venetian art ever mounted in Britain.

Drifting through this wonderful display, one finds the senses a little choked by the sheer Lucullan quantity of it. Among the major figures only Giorgione is missing. The rest are there in profusion: Titian, Veronese, Moroni; a whole gallery of Lotto; another hung with Bonifazio, Bordone, Pordenone; Sebastiano del Piombo, and near the entrance Carpaccio's big painting of the Lion of St. Mark. Bassano has a room to himself, as have each of the *terra ferma* cities Bergamo and Brescia; hypnotically it goes on and on—Palma Vecchio, Vittoria, Tintoretto—a luxuriant rain forest of marvels, and this is only the painting. There is exquisite sculpture by Lombardo, Mosca, Cattaneo, Sansovino, Ricci; a room is filled with prints, another with drawings, and there is even a small selection of delicately crafted maps, some illuminated with gold leaf.

Of course there is far too much for one visit—all those gonglike Italian names, the burgeoning, voluptuously colored testimony to God and the saints, the amazing portraits rendered in deep savory hues and incredibly alive still, noble and clear as the music of

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Willaert or Gabrieli. (My own favorite was not a Titian but the more modest Bassano figure *Man of Letters,* thoughtful, lambent-eyed with a fierce long pointed beard like Saint Jerome's.)

Not everything is terribly serious. The brawny subject of Titian's *Portrait of a Man* holds a small red book against his full-sleeved heavy black gown, one finger keeping a place in the pages. His moon face stares into the distance with patient boredom. Would he rather be reading—Aretino, perhaps?—than standing upright and still for the great painter? Jacopo's *Susanna and the Elders* is an almost satirically edgy image of dirty old men leering at a cowering, half-naked girl. Girolamo da Treviso's *Sleeping Venus* and *Nymph in a Landscape* by Palma Vecchio are clear High Renaissance equivalents of today's blank-faced starlet pinups. A small Ricci bronze of two copulating satyrs, executed with great style and humor, shows the relish of patrons then (as now) for classy pornography. Among the sacred images and entertaining lighter work and the celebrating exuberance of the portraits, a grim exception brought me up short. This was a late painting by Titian, perhaps his last: the horrifying, vivid *Flaying of Marsyas,* arousing (like late works of Goya) a shudder of wonder at the phantoms which must haunt the imaginations of very old men.

Outside the Royal Academy again, standing in the noise and fumes of Picadilly, I felt that the contrast with the beauty inside was right, if not quite perfect. As anyone knows who has been to Venice, the uncanny radiance of the city is liable to be shrouded in a noxious stench. This must have been much worse in the sixteenth century; it may account for the soft introverted feeling in much of the painting, which makes it almost a shelter for the bodily senses so unpleasantly assaulted by reeking canals outside the great palaces, churches, and villas.

I suppose theater can perform a similar function for the moral sense. This could explain the popular attraction of some light comedy which raises laughs by flouting social conventions, and then comforts the audience by confirming them after all, as they are rarely confirmed in real life. But the conventions of theater are broader than that. A playwright often prefers to twist the sympathy of the audience into anger against those unwritten rules, and to extend this anger to damn those rules which are written down with good reason and do not deserve the contempt which is so fashionable among "artists."

Something very much like this happens at the Lyric Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue, in Hugh Whitemore's *Pack of Lies,* which was nominated by the Society of West End Theatre as play of the year.[1] A while ago Mr. Whitemore helped the BBC with a documentary drama about Peter and Helen Kroger. Known in America as Morris and Lona Cohen, they were friends and colleagues of the Rosenbergs, and later members of the Gordon Lonsdale spy ring in Britain. Their bungalow in the London suburb of Ruislip was the transmitting station for sending British naval secrets to Moscow. In due course they came under suspicion and then surveillance by British Counter-intelligence or MI5. Having explored this event in a straightforward way on television, Mr. Whitemore thought it would be theatrically attractive to see it from another point of view—that of the neighbors who, unwillingly, allowed their home to be used by the MI5 surveillance team.

The family is made carefully unexceptional. Bob works for the government and has security clearance but is the most ordinary of chaps; he lives in solid home comfort with Barbara, his rather nervous wife, and their daughter Julie, a teenager who calls Mrs. Kroger "Aunt Helen" and receives presents from her now and again. Julie's mother is very close to Aunt Helen, who often pops in for tea and gossip and women's confidences about the tribulations of suburban life. At Christmas both Krogers pay a visit with gifts and booze and good

1 The award was actually won by David Mamet's *Glengarry Glenross,* discussed below.

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cheer. Bob is less intimate with them than is his wife, but accepts the Krogers in good part as friendly if gauche Americans in the book trade.

Into this domestic idyll comes a tall dry official from Whitehall with an odd request: the government wants to watch a man who has been seen entering the Kroger house across the street. May they use Julie's upstairs bedroom for this? It will be just for a few days, and the Krogers must not be told. Bob and Barbara agree reluctantly, for this is like spying on a close friend. The few days stretch into weeks; indignation becomes vehement. Finally Barbara can stand it no longer and demands that she and her family be left alone. The man from MI5 is steely: "We insist," he says. Bob and Barbara are aghast, and he softens a bit: "Earnestly implore," he says gently, but the couple really has no choice.

The strain increases until Barbara is close to collapse. She threatens to tell Helen Kroger what is going on. Bob, more aware of what is at stake, smothers this impulse but cannot ease his wife's desperate guilt. She feels a traitor and a hypocrite and this does not change when the Krogers' activities are coolly detailed for her by the man from Whitehall. "People don't stop being people," she believes, "just because they've done something wrong!" She is on the point of breakdown when the Krogers are arrested and imprisoned. When Julie learns the truth about them, she takes all the gifts from Aunt Helen into the backyard and burns them. This natural reaction is horrible in her mother's eyes. Out of curiosity Julie visits Helen Kroger in prison and is told that she will never, never forgive Barbara, which adds to the devastation already suffered by the poor woman. In a sad spoken epilogue Bob reveals how Barbara walked into the kitchen one day, sat down, and died of a heart attack.

This beautifully done but depressing play is part of a modern tradition which substitutes vulnerability for tragic stature, and works on the lowest common denominator of compassion. (Like *Death of a Salesman,* in which Willy Loman's lack of a pension is distended into a major crisis of social guilt.) In this case it uses the ordinary human failure to see beyond the end of an emotionally twitching nose. There are many women of Barbara's type; gangs of them are clustered around American air bases in Britain at this moment, shouting and screaming about peace. But this is not the picture of her in Whitemore's play. Every emotional weapon in a formidable theatrical arsenal is put into the hands of Judi Dench, who plays Barbara. A small, appealingly dumpy woman, Miss Dench is one of those actresses who, like the legendary Madame Modjeska, could move an audience to tears by reading the telephone book in a foreign tongue. With all the considerable artistry at her command she concentrates the emphatic pain and anger of the audience, not on the female monster who violates Barbara's friendship in an appallingly ugly manner, but on the civil servant who is trying to trap and disarm the monster. Of course it is not Miss Dench but Mr. Whitemore who is responsible for this effect. It is heightened by the astounding performance of Barbara Leigh-Hunt as Helen Kroger. Though she is the most British of actresses, her embodiment of the loud American neighbor is a believable miracle, nearly faultless in voice, accent, and the physical gestures and attitudes which catch whole that bountifully awful Yankee insensitivity that I remember well from such women in my childhood. She gets comically drunk, maunders at her irritated husband, and her graceless manners when she is sober seem to spring only from the genial fault of an over-liberal heart. One cannot imagine that this person would *seriously* hurt anyone. Over against this bright-plumaged personage we have a grey, aloof, dispassionate civil servant, little more than a robot of flesh and blood who tortures a poor decent woman to death.

In other words, the play is as stacked as the deck of a Mississippi riverboat gambler —in favor of the bad guys and against the good guys. The bad guys are not this big-hearted couple who is (it is said) doing something vague about submarine-warfare

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secrets. It is all so *technical,* who cares? People are what matter. That there may be some urgent connection between the safety of people who matter and the stealing of naval secrets is not mooted in this play, by anyone. Whitemore and his excellent cast and director (Clifford Williams) would surely object that they are just showing the story through Barbara and her family, but that is disingenuous. As professionals they have good cause to know that a play is not a discrete object like a sheet of stained glass, but a ritual emotional maelstrom. This one works to suck the audience into an indelible *sharing* of Barbara's attitude, and into a consequent poisoned anger at those whose business it is to protect the rest of us people-who-matter—and into thoughtless sympathy for those who are trying to outflank that protection and destroy our society. The convention which should limit these urgings to the confines of the theater does not apply because this play is billed as a true story, part of the real world. It is clearly calculated to form attitudes and emotions which will persist outside the theater.

Subversive, then? As a Marxist might say, objectively yes. But I do not think this is deliberate. The indifference to public values (Mr. Whitemore and Barbara are not, after all, identical) or their careless warping for the sake of sentimental appeal is a sample of that suffocating gown-versus-town complacence so well expressed by E. M. Forster when he said, "If I have to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I shall have the courage to betray my country."

The view is more obliquely set into a much-praised BBC television film by the British middlebrow writer Alan Bennett, *An Englishman Abroad.* Directed by John Schlesinger, it is also based on a real incident, a meeting in Moscow between the English actress Coral Browne and the (genuine) traitor Guy Burgess. As with Whitemore's play, the production is flawless, the acting wonderful. Miss Browne plays herself and Burgess is delightfully performed by Alan Bates, who gives us a lovably roguish eccentric. He vomits into the sink in Miss Browne's dressing room (she is the Queen in a tour of *Hamlet*), steals her soap and cigarettes, and then invites her to his flat—ostensibly for lunch but actually so that she can measure him for a suit which he hopes she will order for him in London.

Burgess's spying is barely touched on, in a naughty-naughty comment by Miss Browne, who says like a reproving nanny, "Pipe isn't fooling Pussy"—that is, they are having a nice chat but she isn't forgetting that he's been a bad boy. Burgess is made to say that he doesn't love his country, though he is fond of the English countryside and London. Treason, well, he doesn't really know what that means. Back in London Miss Browne finds Burgess's former tailor obsequiously ready to serve him still, and his bootmaker too. Only the firm that used to make his pajamas refuses to deal with the traitor. This scandalizes Miss Browne because, as she says, they were happy to provide him with nightwear when he was one of the most notorious homosexuals in London. This piquant equation of homosexuality with treason (i.e., if you tolerate the one, why not the other?) does not impress the manager, but then he is a Hungarian. Burgess is last seen in Moscow, preening himself in his new suit, backed by triumphantly British music. There is not the slightest hint of irony in any of this.

Not the message exactly, but the assumption behind this film is that *nice* people don't concern themselves with awfully *infra dig* things like treason. Being lovable and eccentric are the salient points of life: charm, a taste for scenery, things like that. *Être épaté, c'est tout pardonner.* Shortly before the BBC transmitted the film I heard a radio interview with the author, who humphed in an unintentionally comic sneering drawl that he, like his protagonist, did not know what treason means, actually. I mean, he said, aren't people knighted for running big companies which hurt other people's interests? And isn't that the same thing? Alan Bennett is not one of your Royal Shakespeare Company Marxist playwrights. His work

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has purveyed more nostalgia for the English public (private) school than anger at social injustice. The interview revealed him as something worse than a tendentious political writer: an arrogant, if talented, spongy-minded dramatist who does not deign to take seriously the moral and political criteria which condemn Guy Burgess. Like Miss Browne in his film, he seems incapable of grasping or caring about the man's viciousness. The Greeks had a word for such fastidious people. They called them idiots.

After Bennett's dapper nonsense it was almost a relief to plunge into the agitprop yawpings of David Edgar at the RSC's Barbican Theatre. Mr. Edgar *is* one of the Royal Shakespeare Company crew I have just mentioned, known in New York for his excellent stage adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby*. In London he is better recognized as an unmistakably middle-class spokesperson for the proletariat. He too is a haughty fellow, like the violinist who at his farewell concert played a single note for three hours. When asked why, the great fiddler said, "All my life I have been looking for THE NOTE; now I have found it." For David Edgar the note is far-left socialism, and with his new play *Maydays* he claims the rebirth of left-wing theater in Britain.

Left-wing theater never did quite die. It went into a state of suspended animation at the RSC where, to quote ex-director David Jones, "There's a dangerous feeling that nothing interesting ever happens outside the RSC." Theater of the Left was temporarily buried there under a notional heap of boredom, and *Maydays* has precisely the quality of the disinterred: it is semi-alive like a zombie. This is because almost everyone in this huge production (fifty-three listed characters including six papersellers and three "libertarians," plus other parts) speaks as though his or her head has been surgically replaced with a *papier-mâché* prosthesis made of chewed and half-digested Trotskyite pamphlets. There are many portentous epigrams like, "There is all the difference in the world between liberty and liberation!" The performance is very long, almost three hours, and chronicles the disillusionment of certain leftists and their defection to the right. The most prominent are a Russian officer who comes West and a British Trotskyist writer who ends up hobnobbing with Tories. For Mr. Edgar, who sees the Tory Party as an extension of the quasi-fascist League of St. George, this is a great tragedy. I reckon it is a tragedy for those who pay good money to endure this mammoth exercise in buttonholing. But the audience, which thrilled perceptibly to the singing of the "Internationale," did not seem to mind as much as I did. The modish set and students of Hampstead and Islington and Kentish Town have a taste for this stuff. It seems to excite and amuse them, which is one of the great mysteries of British theater.

It would be a mistake to assume from these comments that I regard British theater as generally bad or corrupt. Like the little girl with the little curl right down in the middle of her forehead, when it is good it is very, very good. A serving of the finest was available to Manchester audiences this winter, when the Royal Exchange Theatre Company mounted Michael Elliott's production of *Moby Dick*. Adapting and staging this gigantic American literary totem seems a quixotic type of enterprise, like the Orson Welles version which I saw in London some years ago, full of shifting rostrums and strange, not to say weird, acting. This time, however, there is no sense of scaling Everest with a walking stick and a parasol; neither are there any neo-expressionist tricks with lights and setting. The Royal Exchange is a theater in the round, constructed in levels which look down upon the central acting area with its four compass-point exits. Into this was set the church of Father Mapple with his ship's bow pulpit, later turned to make the foredeck of the *Pequod*, centered on a huge mast with rigging and sails. These cleared into the flies to make way for the whaleboats, mimed by their crews rowing out across a blue-tarpaulined floor to harpoon the great sea beasts. One exit was filled with a raised platform to contain Ahab's

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cabin and chart room. It was as though this play and its story had been created for this theater, rather than carved from the whale-like corpus of Melville's novel.

With an alchemical touch Elliott has theatrically tamed the tremendous sweep of Melville's nineteenth-century mandarin prose. Ahab was to have been played by the television star Patrick McGoohan, but he withdrew. No apparent harm was done to the production. The general level of acting is average to good, which makes for transparency, letting play and character show through. Ishmael's innocent amazement, the agonizing of Starbuck, the solid dignity and pride of Queequeg are nicely captured, as is the rugged harsh timbre of the crew—some West Indian, some American (these accents are the principal weak spot), and one or two English. The full splendor of the book's rhetoric is preserved and, far from holding back the action, drives it forward at flank speed, stoking Ahab's terrible obsession with a volatile blend of force and subtlety which I would not have thought possible in the coarse medium of theater.

There are too many fine scenes to mention them all, but the lustral tempering of Ahab's harpoon on white-hot coal is accomplished with demonic effect, and the climactic incident of his death rides on a superb technical coup: as before, his crew pulls its ghostly whaleboat out across the blue floor, which this time begins to inflate, billowing and surging like the sea under the yelling and struggling men. When at last Ahab is torn from among them to vanish over the edge into the depths of this blue water, the Royal Exchange's cockpit has become a seething cauldron, in which we have seen played out a great epic of worship before savage Gods, a ceremonial dance of death more symphonic than theatrical in its impact. This show deserves a far wider audience than it has found in an English provincial city.

In a recent issue of *Commentary,* Richard Grenier remarked on the Hollywood growth industry of exporting anti-American films. London has a sort of cottage venture at Peter Hall's National Theatre which imports anti-American shows. Latter examples are *Tales of Hollywood* (discussed in my December, 1983, "Letter from London"), which runs concurrently with *Glengarry Glenross,* by David Mamet, a world premiere using crooked real-estate dealing as a paradigm of American business and life. (This has had its American premiere at the Goodman Theater in Chicago.[2]) Mamet's play proved my assertion that Americans do a more ferocious job of slanging their country than any European does.

However, knocking the United States is one thing; perverting American theatrical tradition is something else. *Jean Seberg* is an American show born and bred. Its concoction began in 1979 when lyricist Christopher Adler (son of Richard) read of Jean Seberg's suicide. This seemed to him "the stuff of which musicals are made." His inspiration was taken to Marvin Hamlisch for music and Julian Barry for a book. Peter Hall has directed it at the National Theatre. "It is not a lightweight attempt," Hall said. "I absolutely believe it is our business to be doing it." Hamlisch said confidently that it was "going to be one of the greatest achievements of all time," and on BBC television's *Omnibus* he compared himself and his collaborators to Michelangelo.

The show is stainlessly bright and polished. The disastrous career and marriages of Jean Seberg are sketched neatly. She herself appears as stupid, shallow, brutally ambitious, selfish, untalented, violently self-pitying and hysterical—totally inadequate in personality to the profession she has chosen. She is also willing to shoulder aside her husband and first child so that she can "try to discover who I am." Her radical chic activity provokes the FBI into a repellent attempt to discredit her by planting a lie in the media that her second pregnancy is by a Black Panther father. This so shocks Miss Seberg that she goes into premature labor and bears the child, which dies in four days.

2 *Glengarry Glenross* played at the Goodman Theater from January 27 to March 4.

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Eventually her self-centered demands for pity come to nothing. It is all too much, and she kills herself in the back of a car in Paris.

The anti-American element is routine and banal, with grey-masked high school kids dancing and singing about conformity, a mocking and whining refrain, "Everybody wants to be in the moooo-vies," and J. Edgar Hoover brooding and booming like a pantomime villain in a tower overlooking the set. Steadily the show degenerates from low to lower point. A number about the FBI's gossip is musically and textually caressed, even fondled with salacious glee. A lament in the form of a love song is belted out by "Jean" over the open coffin of her dead child, which is exposed to journalists to prove that it is not black. As one London critic said with distaste, the purpose of the dead baby is to bring down the house. Even this did not prepare me for the finale, in which Seberg's death is alloyed with material grossly travestied from *St. Joan,* to parallel the sordid suicide with Joan of Arc's spiritual defiance of the Inquisitor (Hoover, down from his tower) and her subsequent burning at the stake.

Mind-shattering as this is in its near-absolute crassness, it is not the most sickening aspect of this repulsive excuse for a musical "drama." I never met Jean Seberg, so I asked a friend in Paris who had what she was like. His description made her rather ordinary—certainly nothing like the irredeemably vile *dramatis persona* in this show. What the FBI did was to exaggerate the stature and influence of this mediocre, well-intentioned but insignificant actress, so rationalizing its persecution of her. This was foul and so was the outcome, but I doubt it can match the pompous, self-degrading achievement of Messrs. Adler, Hamlisch, Barry, and Hall, who puffed up Jean Seberg exactly as the FBI did, then dragged this wretched unhappy woman out of her grave and—for the purpose of *entertainment* (no healthy imagination could connect this proceeding with uplift)—deliberately, ruthlessly, smugly, and jubilantly stripped her of whatever scrap and shred of human dignity she may have had left when she died. Only the most profound, monstrous evil deserves such treatment; in these circumstances only the most barbarous, bottomlessly callous vulgarity could inflict it. Hamlisch says, "I think I'm trying to raise the standard of what the masses want to see." I left the scene of this exertion feeling dirty, as though I had been present at some abominable heathen rite in which worshipers and priests exhumed, then piously abused a corpse.

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Books

H. D.: the mother of us all?

by Bruce Bawer

If the father of modern American poetry was Ezra Pound, its mother was Hilda Doolittle, and its place of birth—in a rare real-life instance of poetic rightness—was English poetry's glorious crypt, the British Museum. The time was late in 1912. The tall, striking, introspective (though not particularly intellectual) Miss Doolittle had offered to bring some of her new poems to the Museum so that Mr. Pound, who at the age of twenty-seven was already a notorious figure in London's literary underworld, might pass judgment on them.

Doolittle was twenty-six, and a complete nobody. Indeed, her only claim to fame was that, years ago, when she had been a sweet young slip of a thing at Bryn Mawr, Pound (then William Carlos Williams's roomie at the University of Pennsylvania) had been her fiancé. On Hilda's part, at least, it was real love. The crude and charismatic Pound had played Heathcliff to her Cathy. Utterly earthy and living and *real,* he had breathed raw humanity into her ultramundane household (Father Doolittle was a U. of P. astronomer, Mother Doolittle a pious Moravian). Hilda's announcement that she intended to marry her post-Byronic avant-garde neo-pre-Raphaelite made her parents frantic. But they needn't have worried: Pound had other plans. Or, rather, he had no plans, including marital ones; he went where his instincts drove him. In this case they drove him straight out of his engagement to Hilda and into the transatlantic literary swim. Hilda, however, did not give up. She followed him to New York. She followed him to London. With the financial backing of her philistine father, she rejected philistinism forever and became a bohemian, just like Ezra. He wrote poems, so she wrote poems. And finally, on that day in 1912, approximately a year after she had pursued him to the capital of Empire, she showed them to him. The first one he looked at—and the one that did it, according to legend—was "Hermes of the Ways," which begins as follows:

> The hard sand breaks,
> and the grains of it
> are clear as wine.
>
> Far off over the leagues of it,
> the wind,
> playing on the wide shore,
> piles little ridges,
> and the great waves
> break over it.
>
> But more than the many-foamed ways
> of the sea,
> I know him
> of the triple path-ways,
> Hermes,
> who awaits.
>
> Dubious,
> facing three ways,
> welcoming wayfarers,
> he whom the sea-orchard

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shelters from the west,
from the east
weathers sea-wind;
fronts the great dunes.

Wind rushes
over the dunes,
and the coarse, salt-crusted grass
answers.

Heu,
it whips round my ankles!

The absorption in a natural world devoid of humans (except, naturally, for the author) and free of human conflict; the seashore setting; the fascination with the awesome physical power of nature; the Homeric epithets ("many-foamed," "salt-crusted") and Olympian name-dropping; the liberal drawing upon a severely (and intentionally) limited working vocabulary (her short list: *sea, stream, wind, wave, sand, wine, grass, rose, flower, rock, stem, leaf, red, pink, white, violet*) —all are prime characteristics of the *oeuvre* of which "Hermes of the Ways" constitutes the beginning.

These were not, however, the characteristics that mattered to Pound. What struck him, rather, when he read this and Hilda's other poems, was their brevity, their directness, and their natural rhythm. In those first moments, the three famous principles of Imagism, which he later set down in an essay in *Poetry,* must already have begun forming in his mind:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

Suddenly, Pound had a literary movement, and he had a disciple. And who could have been a better one? Hilda was devoted to him, completely willing to be made an example of whatever theory he might come up with, willing even to change her poems around to fit his theory better. Best of all, she had no ideas of her own to muck things up. You could count the ideas in her poems on one finger. "Sea Rose," for example, was a paean to a tough flower able to withstand the assaults of a rough world:

Rose, harsh rose,
marred and with stint of petals,
meagre flower, thin,
sparse of leaf,

more precious
than a wet rose
single on a stem—
you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf,
you are flung on the sand,
you are lifted
in the crisp sand
that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose
drip such acrid fragrance
hardened in a leaf?

"Sea Lily" ("Reed,/slashed and torn/but doubly rich—") is pretty much the same thing, as is "Sheltered Garden," the third and fourth stanzas of which complain about flowers that are beautiful in a too delicate way:

I have had enough—
border-pinks, clove-pinks, wax-lilies,
herbs, sweet-cress.

O for some sharp swish of a branch—
there is no scent of resin
in this place,
no taste of bark, of coarse weeds,
aromatic, astringent—
only border on border of scented pinks.

In place of these "sweet-cress" and "clove-pinks," the poet longs for some species of flora that is beautiful in a not-so-sweet way:

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For this beauty,
beauty without strength,
chokes out life.

The poem ends:

O to blot out this garden
to forget, to find a new beauty
in some terrible
wind-tortured place.

And then there is "Sea Violet," which contrasts "the sea-violet/fragile as agate/. . . fronting all the wind" with "the greater blue violets/. . . on the hill." Who, the poem asks, referring to the blue violets,

. . . would change for these
one root of the white sort?

Violet
your grasp is frail
on the edge of the sand-hill,
but you catch the light—
frost, a star edges with its fire.

And then, of course, there is "Sea Poppies" . . . but the pattern should be clear. Brought together in *Collected Poems 1912-1944,*[1] these verses—as long and slender as the poet herself—look like the clones they are. In order to make any kind of impression at all they have to be read not together but individually, alongside the non-Imagist poetry of the time, and alongside the work of other Imagist poets. Examined in sequence in this enormous book, they merely demonstrate that T. S. Eliot might have justly observed of H. D., as he did of Henry James, that she had "a mind too fine to be violated by an idea." It was, at least, a mind ideally suited to the production, if not the explication, of Imagist poetry as Ezra Pound conceived it.

The only thing wrong with Hilda as a disciple, in fact, was her name. How could you build a successful promotion, a sweeping

1 *Collected Poems 1912-1944,* by H. D. (Hilda Doolittle); edited by Louis L. Martz. New Directions, 629 pages, $35.

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reform, an influential theory, around the works of someone named Hilda Doolittle? So before Pound tipped his hat and departed the British Museum that day, he scrawled something at the bottom of the manuscript of "Hermes": *H. D. Imagiste.* Voilà! A new identity. The pathetic, pretentious, and much-patronized Hilda was Hilda no more. One stroke of Ezra Pound's pencil and she was transformed forever into H. D.—mysterious, exotic, inscrutable.

Born with her was a movement that Pound lost no time establishing. Within months, H. D.'s first poems were in print (in Harriet Monroe's new magazine, *Poetry,* out of Chicago) and there were other poets, both American and British, gathering before the altar of the Three Principles: Amy Lowell, John Gould Fletcher, D. H. Lawrence, F. S. Flint, and Richard Aldington. By the spring of 1914 the movement had collected its works in a magazine, *The Egoist,* edited by Pound and Aldington, and an anthology, *Des Imagistes.* And that, as it happens, was pretty much that. Before the spring was over, Pound had left H. D. at the altar of Imagism as he had left her previous incarnation, poor old Hilda, at the altar of marriage; and he had founded another poetic movement, Vorticism (which, incidentally, didn't even make it through the summer). The position of patron of Imagism passed to Miss Lowell, the corpulent heiress from Boston whom H. D. called "the hippopoetess"; the position of Man in H. D.'s life passed to Aldington, who (on orders, one half suspects, from Pound) had married her in the fall of 1913. Under Lowell, the movement (which a disgruntled Pound claimed had degenerated into a flabby, self-indulgent "Amygism") lasted a couple more years, then rolled over and died. The Imagist poem was simply too restricted a form to capture the interest of any good, original poet (or good, original reader, for that matter) for very long. As for the Aldington union, it didn't last much longer. Although the two stayed legally married until 1938, and H. D. signed herself "Mrs. Hilda Aldington" until her death in 1961, the two never lived together after 1919.

Aldington's place in H. D.'s life was taken by a woman who was as practical, tough, independent, intellectual, political, and businesslike as H. D. was not. Like H. D., she published (for she too was a writer) under a name which was not her natural one. The difference, however, was that Bryher (born Winifred Ellerman, daughter of one of the richest men in England) had made up her own name, and for her own reasons. H. D. didn't love Bryher, wasn't even attracted to her, but because Bryher—with her take-charge attitude, her efficiency, her devotion to H. D., and her huge fortune—made life very easy, H. D. stayed with her for a while. Forty-three years, to be exact. During these decades, H. D. wrote a number of books, most of them volumes of autobiographical prose that she called novels and that were published by Bryher. (She seems to have been the financial angel behind half the small literary presses functioning in Europe between the wars.)

Reading through these uniformly slack, sloppy, self-indulgent books one realizes that this most celebrated practitioner of the narrowest of poetic forms—"our gracious Muse, our cynosure and the peak of our achievement," Ford Madox Ford called her in his 1930 *Imagist Anthology*—was possessed of an extremely limited gift. Limited by what? Ironically, by the same dogged non-intellectuality that made her a successful Imagist. H. D. liked nothing better than an opportunity not to cerebrate, and it is largely because of this that she was so good at being an Imagist and so bad at being anything else. The sad fact is that, freed of the discipline of Pound and his movement, H. D. grew lazy. Her work lost its tightness, its control, its rhythm, and often descended into banal self-parody:

> O which of the gifts of the gods
> is the best gift?
> this,
> this,
> this,
> this;
> escape
>
> .

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from the power of the hunting pack
and to know that wisdom is best
and beauty
sheer holiness.

But all this doesn't matter to Barbara Guest, whose unrelenting focus in her biography, *Herself Defined: The Poet H. D. and Her World,*[2] is on H. D.'s relationship with Bryher and the almost diary-like prose works that grew out of that union. So strong is this emphasis that the book is, by Guest's own admission, almost a double biography, with H. D.'s involvement in a handful of cheap, obscure films that Bryher produced in the Twenties receiving as much attention as her involvement in Imagism. *Herself Defined* is clearly a labor of love—but just as clearly, the object of love is not H. D.'s work, nor even her real inner life. Rather, what Guest is in love with is the idea of H. D. and Bryher's seemingly perfect little *ménage*. She is in love, that is, with an image. She is absolutely charmed, for example, by H. D.'s endless, neurotic "I-am-an-ancient-Greek" conceit, which was a major facet not only of her poetry but of her day-to-day life. H. D. called herself "Dryad." Aldington was her Roman. Havelock Ellis was "Chiron" (after Achilles's teacher). And so on. Even when she was nearly dead with pneumonia, H. D. managed to keep up the game: "If I could walk to Delphi," she groaned to Bryher, "I should be healed." Guest never pauses in her apparent admiration of this pretentious nonsense to attempt even the slightest explanation of it. She acknowledges, to be sure, that H. D. "was fond of making entrances" and that such writers as Louis Wilkinson and John Cournos found her "a natural target for satire." But Guest—in a highly characteristic failure to say anything negative about H. D. without smothering it in qualifications—decides that such satires "are tributes to the power of H. D.'s personality. She had charisma, a special ability to project." That Guest is so intrigued by this

2 *Herself Defined: The Poet H. D. and Her World*, by Barbara Guest. Doubleday, 360 pages, $18.95.

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charisma, and so uninterested in what it masked, is a source of frustration throughout *Herself Defined.* For we never feel, while reading this book, that Guest has even come close to defining H. D. (unless we believe, with Vonnegut, that "we are what we pretend to be"). Unfortunately, to Guest's mind, her duty as a biographer of H. D. is not to explain but to celebrate, not to understand but to pay homage, not to leap over the wall of willful mystery surrounding her subject but simply to worship at it. Indeed, one senses at times that Guest would consider it a betrayal of her idol to make that leap.

Thus the reader of *Herself Defined* is constantly in the position of being surprised. One has no inkling that Bryher might be living on the edge until Guest mentions a 1920 suicide attempt. One has no inkling that H. D. might be living on the edge until Guest dutifully reports, "Then came H. D.'s mental breakdown . . . ." To give Guest her due, she does attempt to account for this event, but the explanation, such as it is, comes as an afterthought. "There is no written evidence of events leading up to the breakdown," she writes; "however, interpretations can be drawn from her writing. It is apparent that H. D. had overextended herself . . . ." Guest goes on to explain later that H. D.'s mounting euphoria and increasing participation in séances, both previously discussed and buried amid a barrage of other, irrelevant matters, may well have marked the approach of a psychological crisis. To mention such facts and not suggest their possible significance until several pages—or even chapters—later, when they have been completely forgotten, is spectacularly ineffective biographical writing. Such a procedure, unhappily, is something of a habit with Guest, whose favorite phrase, one begins to believe after a while, is "This reveals that . . . ." Guest does not seem to have any rational system of selecting facts; she presents the details of H. D.'s life haphazardly, routinely paying more attention to the trivial than to the crucial, and not even making it clear most of the time which is which. She forgets, for example, to mention that H. D. was being neglected on the European poetry scene—a rather important piece of information—until she tells us that H. D.'s appearance in Bryher's magazine *Life and Letters Today* was intended to counteract this neglect.

As all of this might suggest, *Herself Defined* is an incredibly confused piece of work. Guest does not tell us about the childhood of H. D.'s daughter Perdita until near the end of the book, when Perdita has already reached adulthood. We do not learn until page 247—it should have come a hundred pages earlier—that "it may even have been Yeats who first encouraged H. D.'s interest and reliance on horoscopes, her gropings into the occult." Not until after the section of the book covering World War I do we begin to hear how emotionally devastated H. D. was by the war. And there are some gaps Guest never does fill in. One will not learn from *Herself Defined,* for example, how H. D. and Aldington came to be an item, or how she managed to pull off what Guest describes as a complete recovery from her nervous breakdown. Oddly enough, if answers to such questions as these are omitted from the book, some facts are trotted out again and again. Guest tells us more than once, for instance, that H. D. "rarely expressed herself on the subject of other poets"; that there were "several H. D.s: the schoolgirl giggling with her friend, the faun startled in a brake, the priestess of letters" (and once, in this case, is plenty); that "H. D. was a powerful presence"; that H. D. was rich but thought of herself as impoverished; that H. D.'s friends formed something of "a deferential family circle" and that she "wished to maintain her position as a solitaire with her solitude inviolate, yet with friends within calling distance." Most frequent of all, perhaps, are Guest's out-of-the-blue litanies of praise for the steadfastness of "Bryher, the firmest of foundations." One has the sense sometimes that Guest is lost at sea in this book and must repeat these formulas—H. D.'s solitariness, Bryher's devotion—in order to regain her bearing.

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Whether or not Guest is lost at sea, the reader certainly is. One never feels oneself to be witnessing the growth of H. D.; one never (as in the best biographies) feels the subject changing, undergoing the subtle shifts that occur over the course of years. Guest takes one around H. D. in the manner of a tour guide who leads one breathlessly from one room of a great mansion to another, never letting one pause to look around and take one's bearings, never explaining which room is which and who inhabits it and what its history is, but simply spewing out random facts about whatever happens to catch her eye. This may well be meant as a reaction against every ponderous, time-anchored biography ever written; but it just doesn't work. Guest has collected the parts of a puzzle but has not fitted them together—she has only handed them to the reader in a box.

Worst of all, the puzzle pieces aren't even well wrought. Reading *Herself Defined,* one continually feels the urge to rewrite Guest's clumsy prose:

> *Beowulf* [a book by Bryher] is delightful. It brings out the human suffering amid the vivid scenes of wartime; above all, it is a story of survival, just as H. D.'s *Walls* survived. Bryher had summoned all her knowledge of London wartime street life to incorporate in this book, and she does it simply and sparsely, but there is a scent of the common smell of the devastation of London and the desperate attempts of the ordinary people to survive.

Guest says *infers* at least twice when she means *implies*; she puts whole sentences in italics for dubious reasons; her punctuation is often bizarre. And her affection for the exclamation point makes the book read, in places, like copy for a tabloid:

> [H. D.'s grandfather] proceeded in 1852, a year before H. D.'s mother's birth, to invent a machine to manufacture paper bags!
>
> William Carlos Williams . . . sent her an acrostic for her birthday, although neglecting the actual birthdate!

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> Looking around the room at his other friends there to greet him, Hilda guessed that one of them was a baronet!
>
> Harriet Weaver . . . "loved and admired people whose gifts were in some sense or other, for self-celebration." This would indeed explain her attraction to Ezra Pound!
>
> Just as she had depended on Pound the first years in England, so she turned to Cournos when the war separated her from Richard, whom she had turned to upon the "desertion" of Pound!
>
> The book is a medley of comments on the American West together with Bryher's ideas on education; its heroine is Marianne Moore!
>
> She also had become very India-conscious, and after visiting Campione on the lake was under the illusion that the town of nesting villas was like a Ganges village!

Sometimes Guest seems to be modeling her style on that of H. D., whose prose is typically rough, rambling, and slightly hysterical. At other times Guest's prose has the precise, affected quality of H. D.'s poetry. In her preface, for example, she writes that "I am grateful for those moments when H. D. with a blithe generosity permitted me to stumble on her rituals, her magic stones." (Guest is not the first to ape her idol's style; a predecessor in the field of H. D. studies, Susan Stanford Friedman, writes in the preface to her 1981 book *Psyche Reborn* of "the emergence of *Psyche Reborn* from the chrysalis of my own life.") It is interesting to observe that Guest's prose is disorganized in the same way that H. D.'s is. Like *Herself Defined,* H. D.'s *End to Torment,* a memoir of Pound, shifts constantly, and nervously, from year to year, apparently dictated by nothing except the idle meanderings of the author's memory. One senses that both H. D. and Guest are more interested in creating something arresting than something truly magnificent, more concerned with style than substance. When H. D.'s book *Bid Me To Live* first appeared, *Newsweek*'s reviewer described it as a piece of "quivering impressionistic prose." The same description could, one supposes, be applied fairly to Guest's book, only the prose quivers altogether too much, and the impressions never come into focus.

Meandering with Montaigne

Michel de Montaigne Travel Journal. Translated and with an introduction by Donald M. Frame. Foreword by Guy Davenport. North Point Press, 175 pages, $11.50

reviewed by David Paul

Nowadays we hardly ever travel. We get transferred, as passively and swiftly as possible, from departure point to destination. This multiple hopping goes on multiplying daily to a degree inconceivable a hundred, or even fifty, years ago. Today every student makes his trip by air to Peru, Istanbul, Cairo, Delhi, wherever his fancy leads him. So it is difficult to think back to a time when all extended travel was something between an organized expedition and a pilgrimage, or a voyage that might extend to months and years; and only the leisured and wealthy, or those driven by need or vocation, were given to travel on any scale.

Montaigne was one of the leisured and just sufficiently wealthy, equipped with all the intelligence and curiosity—social, political, moral, mechanical, child-like—that would make travel both tempting and a reward. And in 1580 he had several reasons to impel him into movement. First was the sense of achievement: the years of sedentary study and writing in his tower had produced the *Essays,* published in their first form a few months before he set off on his travels. (They were to be much expanded in later years to the form in which they are known today.) The author had been full of nervous

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qualms about their reception. Would they be considered odd, eccentric, too much obsessed with self? Or too unfamiliar, too strange to be generally acceptable? He had invented the term "Essai," quite a new idea in contemporary terms, though he based it on the example of his hero, Plutarch. Nowadays, at least in the English-speaking world, Plutarch is mainly read in the light of what Shakespeare made from some of his *Lives*. In Montaigne's day, thanks to Amyot's recent translation into French, Plutarch had emerged as one of the masters of classic literature.

Whatever the author's qualms, the *Essays* proved to be an immediate success, thanks partly, I suspect, to a feature which tends to put off the modern reader: their Latinity, their continual wealth of Latin quotation and classical allusion, from Virgil, Juvenal, Lucretius, Seneca, Cicero, all the writers revived or recently rediscovered by the renaissance of learning. This Latinity had deepened and diversified since the days of Erasmus and More, and was now to an even greater degree a badge of prestige, a necessary guarantee of personal culture. To Montaigne himself this came very naturally: he had been rigorously disciplined by his loving father to read, write, and speak Latin from early childhood. But one can't help wondering if so much of it in the *Essays* was all that necessary. Amazing as the *Essays* can be, they are rather over-weighted by the author's habit of saying everything that came to mind, and of enforcing it with a Latin quotation whenever that too came to mind. For us today the immense creativity of the Renaissance has tended to wipe out the prestige enjoyed by its men of learning.

There was more than the sense of achievement, and the itch for change after years of seclusion, to impel Montaigne into movement. Now in his late forties, the untroubled and vigorous health of youth behind him, he found he was a victim to the disease that had tormented his father's later years—kidney stones. The great hoped-for cure to this complaint was treatment by the "waters," of natural hot springs or cold, as they were to be

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found scattered over Europe. There were many of these, no two identical in their properties, and each had its claim for curing a variety of diseases, the "stone" being one of the chief. Some had been a cult since Roman times—an added incentive for a Montaigne! So his trip, which was to last eighteen months, was planned with a pilgrimage to Rome as the ultimate aim. It included a stay in Venice, the serene republic, which was fashionably regarded as the model of good, democratic government, and on the way there would be frequent halts of varying length at spas, to test the waters.

The only means of public conveyance was then by post-horse. A company of travelers like the one headed by Montaigne would hire post-horses for a specific length of journey, say, to the next important town, where, after a shorter or longer stay, they would hire fresh mounts on their departure. Montaigne was a curious blend of stoic and hypochondriac, and it speaks for his fortitude that he endured so much riding when so often in pain from his tormenting complaint. Typically he felt his illness most acutely when bored; but even after a sleepless night of pain, when lodged in new and interesting surroundings, he would be up early, indefatigably exploring on foot.

Only a little more than the latter half of the *Travel Journal* was written by Montaigne himself, and half of that in rough Italian, for practice in the language. The earlier portion is the work of a secretary, but I must say the servant compares very favorably with the master, whose views he records in detail from his conversations, along with his master's daily state of health, the stones or gravel he passed, the changing hues of his urine, and the immense variety of locally recommended medicines he took, sometimes with bizarre results. For instance, he took Venetian turpentine (whatever that might be), "two large doses done up in a wafer on a silver spoon" sprinkled with syrup: but "he observed no other effects from it than a smell of March violets in his urine." Surely a unique if not a curative achievement.

The company had set off eastward across France, through Lorraine (visiting Joan of Arc's birthplace in Domrémy and noting that the paintings on the walls recording her deeds were already being weathered away), on across Switzerland to southern Germany via Munich, Austria via Innsbruck, and then down through the Alps to Italy. Montaigne enjoyed the excellent food, wishing he had brought his cook to note the recipes, and the cleanness and comfort of most of the Swiss and German hostelries. He was above all delighted with that kind of "mattress stuffed with feathers" which, used as a covering, ensured such total lightweight warmth on cold nights. This could only be the ducken or duvet which has so recently traveled north and effected a revolution in bedding in England and elsewhere.

But two-thirds of the *Journal* is taken up with Italy. Surprisingly, little room is given to Venice, which Montaigne so longed to see for himself. Perhaps its exemplary government was too reticent to be easily appreciated. And he was dismayed by the endless throngs of foreign visitors, like himself. But when was Venice ***not*** thus swarming with tourists and sightseers? For him (as for myself and many another, I suspect), Venice was a siren from afar and a somewhat irritating seductress at close quarters: a miracle of achievement against natural odds, but too much admired to prompt the excitement of discovery. He and his company were struck by the immense numbers of courtesans, living in all the luxury of princesses but with much more ostentation. One of them, as a fellow author, sent a bound booklet of her writings to the Sieur de Montaigne, no doubt as a hopeful prelude to closer acquaintance. He gave the messenger two crowns but did not meet the lady.

Italy in 1580 had passed the high noon of its achievement as leader of the world in arts and culture. The sack of Rome in 1527 by Emperor Charles V's mercenaries, who raped, burned, and plundered out of all control, until even the Pope found himself a prisoner in the hands of the Holy Roman Emperor, was a moral earthquake which the artists and intellectuals who experienced it

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never forgot. It showed how easily their world, for all its confidence and vitality, could be undermined. For some, it permanently altered and darkened their lives. And it was a forewarning of the centuries of foreign domination to come. Yet Titian and Michelangelo were only recently dead. Not that this was a fact to be much noted by Montaigne, who evinces no interest in painting or sculpture in his journal. A stump of a column with an Imperial Roman inscription, found in one town or another on their way to the great center of it all, excited him more than any of the more recent architecture he saw everywhere. The building he most admired was the huge Arena at Verona, a monument of early Imperial Rome. On arrival at the Eternal City itself, his first reactions were tempered with disappointment: the surviving grandeur was so scattered and fragmentary. But he was shrewd enough to insist that what survived of the real ancient Rome lay buried under the feet of its present inhabitants, as time and excavation were to prove.

No doubt his companions were relieved to settle in Rome, where they stayed from the end of November 1580 until the following April. They had been five months on the way and some had "complained to him that he often led his party, by various roads and regions, back very close to where he had started . . . either because he had been told about something worth seeing, or because he had changed his mind." To which he replied with what might have been the motto of the essayist: "that he was not going anywhere but where he happened to be, and that he could not miss or go off his path, since he had no plan but to travel to unknown places."

A sincere Catholic, Montaigne was nevertheless more detached than devout in his survey and study of the endless ceremonies, parades, and rituals of the Holy City. His reactions to his audience with the Pope, described in detail as dictated to his secretary, have more of curiosity to them than of awe. He noted that the Pope kindly raised his big toe, as each half-prostrate member of the

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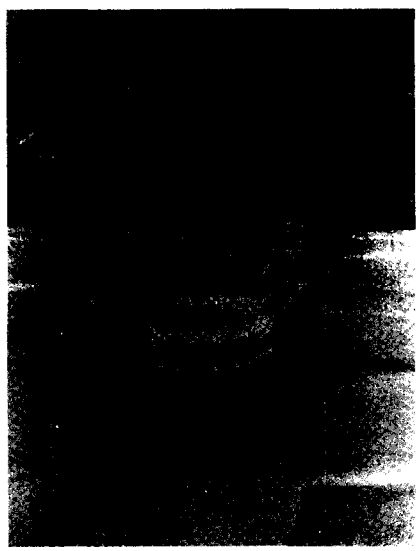
audience dragged himself forward on his knees to kiss it. Montaigne may well have had mental reservations about this Pope, Gregory XIII, a Counter-Reformation fanatic who had openly and joyously celebrated the news of the massacre of the Huguenots in Paris on St. Bartholomew's Night. His mind bruised by France's civil wars, Montaigne was all for tolerance, persuasion by argument, or agreement to differ where this could be peacefully achieved. We can imagine his feelings as he describes, in his own part of the *Journal,* the rite of excommunication on Maundy Thursday:

> The Pope, in full pontificals, takes his stand on the first portico of St. Peter's, on the second story, attended by the cardinals . . . . There, on one side, a canon of Saint Peter's reads aloud a Latin bull by which are excommunicated an infinite variety of people, among others the Huguenots, under that very name, and all the princes who have appropriated some part of the territories of the Church, at which articles the cardinals de Medici and Caraffa, who were next to the Pope, laughed very hard.

Both the fanaticism and the accompanying cynicism are dispassionately noted. But what prevails throughout the *Journal* is Montaigne's curiosity about and fascination with the human temperament in all its strangest manifestations: for instance, the flagellants —stalwart young men and boys of twelve— of whom he saw five hundred or so in an Easter procession, stripped to the waist and lashing their backs until the blood streamed, but all unflinching, casual, even boisterously cheerful, one young lad assuring a commiserating woman that he did it for her sins, not his own. These "penitents" were hired by the richer sort to atone for the buyer's sins, and by extension, for those of the community. So the double enigma was: how much will the needy poor do, and enjoy, for the sake of the money, or, can they be convinced of the virtue of their task to a degree which annuls the pain of it?

At quite another extreme, the diarist notes



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the curious behavior of a group of Portuguese homosexuals who decided to legitimize their unions in a chosen church, and did so with all the required rites, "read the same marriage and gospel services, and then went to bed and lived together." All this strikes quite a contemporary note: it would not be too way-out for California today, except for the terse conclusion: "Eight or nine Portuguese of this fine sect were burned."

During his six-week stay at the baths of La Villa he was bound to meet some curios among the sick and the valetudinarian, the strangest being the case of the man afflicted with flatulence: "The wind rushed out of his ears with such fury that many times it would not let him sleep.—Whenever he yawned he felt great winds coming out of his ears." However, this man had an infallible cure for constipation, which was to suck and soften four big coriander seeds in the mouth and then "to put them up the anus, which had a very apparent and prompt effect." To complete the picture, he was in the habit of wearing a parasol hat with wings around it eighteen inches wide, a sensible practice, thought Montaigne, since it saved the nuisance of carrying a parasol on horseback. But he doesn't say whether he took up the practice himself.

Montaigne is nearly always terse and astute in his notation of local communities. About Ostia for instance: "This city is all court and nobility. Every man shares in the ecclesiastical idleness. There are no shop-lined streets, or fewer than in a small town . . . . The city hardly changes its appearance from a working day to a holiday. All through Lent they do the rounds of the stations . . . . At this time there are nothing but coaches, prelates, and ladies." Or he gives us a sharp vignette of an industrious Arcady in rural Tuscany:

> I noted three things worth considering: to see the people of these parts working, some in threshing wheat or stacking it, some at sewing or spinning, on the Sunday holiday. The second, to see these country people lute in hand, and even the shepherd girls with Ariosto in their mouth; this is to be seen throughout Italy. The third is to see how they leave the reaped wheat on the fields for ten or fifteen days or more, without fear of their neighbor.

There is too the tantalus pleasure of wondering what further the writer might have told us: for instance, about a group of traveling players, the Desiosi, whose performances he greatly enjoyed, sending them gifts in thanks for the pleasure. Evidently, theater had a strong appeal for him—not surprisingly; but he takes no time to tell us how or what they played. Invited to dinner by the Grand Duke of Florence, he notes the Grand Duke's wife, the notorious Bianca Capello, a Venetian who had been the Duke's mistress before he made her his Duchess and who, thanks to her career and its end, was to become a legend apt for Italian opera and the subject of Middleton's fine play, *Women Beware Women,* only forty years later. Close up, she is seen as "beautiful by Italian notions, an agreeable and imperious face, big bust and breasts the way they like them."

In the years following his return, Montaigne was to draw on the *Journal* for material as he continued expanding the *Essays.* The manuscript itself was lost to all knowledge for nearly two centuries until it was unearthed from a chest in the family residence and first published in 1774. What would Montaigne have thought of its appearance in print? Clearly it contained matter dangerous for his own time. It was written for himself, as a source book, a memorial of a great and illuminating journey among men. He might have demurred at the printing of all the daily notes of the stones he passed, their shape, size, and color, the endless pints of sulphurous water he drank, the evacuations and immersions. He would have been astonished and amused, I think, but on the whole pleased. The *Journal* is a legitimate chapter in his lifelong research into the question *What a piece of work is man?,* a quest which, wherever it might cease, would leave one with another question: *Que sçais-je? What do I know?* And his overall purpose as a writer was—in a sense very different from

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that of Rousseau, the calculating shocker, the great *poseur*—to make himself as fully and dispassionately as possible *known* to the reader.

From Kant to cant

Stephen Kern The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918. Harvard University Press, 362 pages, $25

reviewed by Roger Kimball

In *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918,* Stephen Kern sets out to show how the burst of technological, intellectual, and artistic innovation around the turn of the century "created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space." This challenging task will attract anyone who is interested in modernism, though it is worth noting at the outset that Mr. Kern's "distinctive new modes" of experience are not really new but have their foundation in the revolutionary view of man's relation to nature that Descartes crystalized in the seventeenth century.

Near the end of the *Discourse on Method,* Descartes notes that his study of philosophy has led him to a "knowledge that is most useful in life." That knowledge is first of all not contemplative or theoretical but practical. It excludes the traditional idea that the world is a system of final causes in which man's destiny is figuratively writ, and it views nature as material to be grasped and manipulated according to human designs. The model is the artisan's knowledge of his craft: we really know something when we know how to make it. The index of such knowledge is the power and control it affords. Descartes thus envisions the growth of a "practical philosophy" that, unlike the speculative philosophy of the scholastics, can explain natural phenomena by explaining how things work. Hence the famous declaration that his method will render man "the master and possessor of nature."

The success of modern technology has shown that Descartes's vision was not idle. For in an important sense, technology has remade the world, bringing close what was far away, delivering up the past to the inspection of the present. "All distances in time and space are shrinking," Heidegger wrote in a late essay,

> Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all . . . . Distant sites of the most ancient cultures are shown on film as if they stood this very moment amidst today's street traffic . . . . The peak of this abolition of every possible remoteness is reached by television, which will soon pervade and dominate the whole machinery of communication.

It may be, as Heidegger is at pains to argue, that this conquest of time and space brings with it a new sense of distance, one less susceptible of technological abridgement. "Short distance," he observes, "is not in itself nearness." In taking charge of reality, man has not yet defeated distance. Instead, the speed and effectiveness with which he manipulates the world make genuine community and intimacy more elusive than ever. The dream of a "global village" remains unrealized.

Nevertheless, technology's assault on distance has transformed the way we live and, if Mr. Kern is right, this transformation reflects itself nowhere more clearly than in our experience of time and space. "My primary object," he writes, "is to survey significant changes in the experience of time and space, including some for which I am able to identify no specific 'cause.' Hence I do not explain why the telephone was invented or why the stream-of-consciousness novel began to appear." This extraordinary, though representative, statement is bound to give one pause. In what sense was the invention of the telephone "a change in the experience of time and space"? What would it mean to explain *why* it was invented? Are there

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kindred phenomena (the radio, perhaps, or concrete poetry) for which he has been able to identify a "specific cause"?

But one quickly grows accustomed to such mysterious locutions. Contemporary technological innovations, Mr. Kern explains,

> including the telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane established the material foundation for this reorientation; independent cultural developments such as the stream-of-consciousness novel, psychoanalysis, Cubism, and the theory of relativity shaped consciousness directly.

Naturally, one wonders in what sense the theory of relativity, for instance, can be said to "shape consciousness directly." Mr. Kern never exactly says, but it soon becomes clear that his main idea is that such innovations begat both an increasing rationalization of time and space and—what is said to be "more historically unique" (*sic*)—a revolt against the dominance of this objective, impersonal ordering of the temporal and spatial dimensions of experience. He discerns this movement over the entire range of cultural activity. Thus he adduces the challenge that relativity theory issued to the authority of Euclidean geometry and the importance of Cubism and other "de-centering" artistic experiments in the breakdown of one-point perspective in painting. Similarly, he stresses that the establishment of World Standard Time at the end of the nineteenth century was met by a proliferation of interest in "private" or personal time, classically epitomized by Bergson's meditations on *durée* and Proust's doctrine of involuntary memory, both of which are featured in Mr. Kern's exposition.

In outline, this idea is hardly new. The notion that time and space are infinite, logically undifferentiated continua is a corollary of Descartes's view of nature as extended substance. On it depends the ideal of objectivity. And it is not surprising that with the triumph of scientific rationality an objective view of time and space should also gain cur-

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rency. Nor is it surprising that the homogeneity of time and space demanded by science should meet with resistance. For such a view by definition does violence to the way we generally experience time and space. It recognizes no holidays, no neighborhoods, no special times or sacred places. Much of Romanticism bears witness to this resistance, as does Heidegger's warning not to equate knowledge or understanding with technological mastery.

But Mr. Kern wants to exhibit the historical particulars of this dialectic, showing in some detail how the experience of time and space was transformed in the years between 1880 and 1918. This of course is an exceedingly complex undertaking, not least because, as Mr. Kern notes, "it is essential to clarify precisely how technology and culture interact." A look at the book's chapter titles underscores its ambitious scope. The first section, on time, was inspired in large part by Eugène Minkowski's *Lived Time (Le Temps vécu,* 1933) and contains chapters on "The Nature of Time," "The Past," "The Present," and "The Future." There follows a transitional chapter entitled "Speed," and a second long section, on space, which contains chapters on "The Nature of Space," "Form," "Distance," and "Direction." The final two chapters, "The Temporality of the July Crisis" and "The Cubist War," attempt to show how the changes in the experience of time and space detailed in the preceding chapters show themselves in the tangle of events leading up to World War I and in the prosecution of the war itself.

In the course of his exposition, Mr. Kern touches on an extraordinarily wide range of phenomena. Literature, psychology, painting, architecture, physics, philosophy, diplomatic and social history, military strategy, and the history and reception of technology all come under his purview. In his overview of changes in the experience of present time, for example, Mr. Kern discusses the sinking of the *Titanic,* the wireless, Apollinaire's "simultaneous poetry," Joyce's *Ulysses,* Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return, the theory of relativity, and much, much more. Basically, he discovers two things. First, that advances in technology such as the wireless and the telephone reinforced the dream of "simultaneity," of collapsing temporal succession into a present in which it would be possible to experience many separate events at the same time. And, second, that many writers began to emphasize that our experience of the present was not limited to experiencing an isolated moment but was "thickened" by memory and anticipation to include the recent past and near future.

Neither point is especially novel, though such unlikely juxtapositions cannot but be startling. Mr. Kern is aware that his procedure may trouble the reader. "It would be outrageous to link the *Titanic* and Nietzsche directly," he admits, "but by following the shorter intermediate links we see a coherent matrix of thought emerging." This brings us to Mr. Kern's central methodological principle, the idea of "conceptual distance." Designed to cut across traditional disciplinary boundaries, conceptual distance "involves the presentation of diverse sources that are far enough apart to justify broad generalizations about the age without being too far apart to exceed the limits of plausibility." Leaving to one side the question of what counts as plausible, Mr. Kern explains that

> there is greater conceptual distance between the thinking of an architect and that of a philosopher on a given subject than there is between two philosophers, and I assume that any generalization about the thinking of an age is the more persuasive the greater the conceptual distance between the sources on which it is based.

But is this so? Are two philosophers—Heidegger and Carnap, say, or Kant and Nietzsche—necessarily "closer" in the requisite sense than a philosopher and an architect? It may sometimes happen that they are, but this is an empirical question, not a question of principle, and it must be decided case by case, not by fiat.

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Moreover, if the idea of "conceptual distance" is dubious in principle, it proves disastrous in practice. Instead of grounding generalization, it licenses superficiality and methodological chaos. Eager to establish relationships among the most disparate fields of inquiry, Mr. Kern seldom pauses to analyze the vast amount of material he has assembled. Further, his few attempts at analysis are sketchy, embarrassingly rudimentary, and scattered piecemeal throughout the text. ("To avoid repetition," he tells us, "I have dispersed single corpuses [*sic*] among these chapters.") This is all the more annoying in light of the pose of interpretive boldness that he strikes:

> Prominent figures such as Proust have been interpreted with such uniformity that their contributions to the cultural landscape have tended to become as solid and fixed as a rock. By cracking into such routine interpretations . . . I attempt to expose fresh surfaces and attribute those contributions to the precise modes of time or space that are appropriate.

Unfortunately, though, his interpretations are unremittingly pedestrian. In his treatment of Proust, for example, he merely rehearses the standard line about Marcel and the *madeleine,* involuntary memory, and the pastness of paradise. There is nothing that anyone even remotely familiar with Proust will find new or thought-provoking.

As is evident in his prose, Mr. Kern has a tendency to let metaphors and analogies get away from him. If he reads somewhere that the electric light transformed night into day, then the transformation of night into day becomes an accomplished fact and the electric light itself is invested as an emblem of the age's attack on time's irreversibility. Perhaps the most egregious example of this misuse of metaphor is his appropriation of Gertrude Stein's comparison of the First World War to a Cubist painting. "[T]he composition of this war," Stein wrote in her book on Picasso, "was not a composition in which there was one man in the center surrounded by a lot of other men but a composition that had neither a beginning nor an

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end, a composition of which one corner was as important as another corner, in fact the composition of cubism." Stein's remark is typically quirky, brilliant, insightful. But for Mr. Kern, the comparison authorizes an interpretation that all but reduces the war to an expression of some perverse Cubist fantasy. He elevates Stein's passing remark to an explanatory principle, interprets battle tactics as "modes of time and space," and re-christens what results as "The Cubist War." Again, this is not to deny the aptness of Stein's observation or, more generally, the place of metaphor in interpreting history. Paul Fussell's illuminating use of literary sources in *The Great War and Modern Memory* is a case in point. But in Mr. Kern's hands, metaphor takes on a life of its own, overwhelming instead of revealing the reality it refers to.

At bottom, the questionableness of Mr. Kern's approach is inseparable from the questionableness of his thesis. "Since all experience takes place in time and space," he writes,

> the two categories provide a comprehensive framework that can include such wide-ranging cultural developments as Cubism, simultaneous poetry, and ragtime music along with the steamship, skyscraper, and machine gun . . . . By interpreting the culture as a function of time and space, it becomes possible to compare different ages and different cultures topic by topic with less confusion than would be involved in trying to compare historically and culturally specific interpretative categories such as parliaments, unions, families, or bourgeoisies.

But if time and space provide a "comprehensive framework" for the interpretation of culture, it is a singularly uninformative framework. Precisely because they pertain to everything, they explain nothing. Thus we must question his boast that the categories of time and space are "more essential from a strictly philosophical point of view" than categories employed by writers like Carl Schorske, Roger Shattuck, and H. Stuart Hughes who have investigated the same

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period. "They did not," he writes, "attempt to analyze the essential foundations of experience as I have done."

Mr. Kern appeals here to Kant to justify his claim, noting that his "basic categories derive from two essential philosophical categories—essential in that they are, as Kant argues, the necessary foundation of all experience." But this is nonsense. Mr. Kern simply conflates two very different senses of time and space. For, as Kant emphasized, considered as necessary presuppositions of experience, as transcendentals, neither time nor space can be said to change, for neither is "an empirical concept that has been derived from any experience." And just as "space is essentially one," so Kant stresses that "different times are but parts of one and the same time." In Kant's terms, the way we in fact experience time and space in daily life is an empirical, not a transcendental matter, and it is solely as an empirical matter that Mr. Kern is concerned with time and space in this book. To invoke "essential philosophical categories" in this context is merely to make an empty rhetorical gesture.

In fact, though, it is quite clear that Mr. Kern is not interested in "the essential foundations of experience" any more than he is interested in "the nature of time" or "the nature of space." Rather, he is fascinated by the complex interaction of technology and culture, by the way the telephone or Cubism or both together helped shape the modern world. His subject is modernity's confrontation with this aspect of its Cartesian inheritance. This, surely, is enough, and it is a pity that he felt obliged to obscure his topic with so much philosophical posturing and historical trivia. One can imagine a book that marshaled the learning, insight, and patience necessary to address the kinds of problems that *The Culture of Time and Space* skirts. But that book remains to be written.

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Letters

Art criticism

To the Editors:

It was with disappointment that I read Hilton Kramer's recent discussion of the National Endowment for the Arts Seminar on Art Criticism ("Criticism Endowed: Reflections on a Debacle," November, 1983). While there was merit in many of his comments, the article pointed to a conspiratorial atmosphere that simply didn't exist. There were nearly thirty of us present: most of us favored clear writing, frowned on conflicts of interest, and, in fact, approached the issues as directly and skeptically as Mr. Kramer did.

I have been a frequent critic of the Endowment in years past, and this was my first invitation to such a meeting. Anyone who has lectured on the museum or university circuit or written for a scholarly journal will have received some funds from the National Endowment, if only indirectly, but, then, that number must also include Mr. Kramer. Relatively few of the panelists at the seminar had been riding any gravy train. I came prepared to look at the National Endowment critics' fellowships with objectivity and a critical eye. I offered strong criticism, as did many of our fellow commentators. At no time did Mr. Kramer find himself alone on any matter of debate.

There were problems with the critics' fellowships in the past. The purpose of the seminar was to improve the state of criticism in the future. While no program of the Endowment or of the government itself can be entirely free of conflicts of interest, there were no dire conflicts or conspiratorial motives to be seen. I certainly thought some of the notions thrown about foolish or ill-informed, and there were confusions and cross-purposes, but that is hardly the picture painted in "Criticism Endowed: Reflections on a Debacle."

One footnote pointed to my research on the number of art critics practicing in America today. The figures were not manipulated by means of statistics, but consisted primarily of census data and population studies, the same sort of methods used by the government and in the corporate world to answer similar questions. In writing on "professional priorities in art criticism," I was asked to survey current practices and the current state of affairs in order to properly discuss sound policy with relation to art criticism. One aspect of that survey was the simple question, "How many people are writing on art today?" The simple answer is that twenty-five hundred people in the United States are doing so. I was not asked to determine how many good critics there are, or to sort the good from the bad. An accurate assessment of criticism today must precede policy decisions intended to improve criticism tomorrow.

In sum, the meeting was a healthy, sensible opportunity to engage in the sort of healthy debate that leads to sound judgments and wise public policy. The seminar had no power; it was organized to explore issues on the basis of which those in power might make good choices. Given Mr. Kramer's gloomy picture of the state of art criticism today, I should think no one in America would more cheerfully encourage such a debate.

Kenneth S. Friedman
New York City

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To the Editors:

That I would object, regarding Hilton Kramer's "Criticism Endowed: Reflections on a Debacle," to the passage, "It is not irrelevant, perhaps, to point out that the panelists who took this rather liberal view of the critical vocation in awarding the fellowships in 1975 were Elizabeth Baker, Lucy Lippard, and Peter Plagens, all of them recipients of fellowships in other years," is both predictable and justified. When boiled down, the crimes of the 1975 panel were two: giving John Coplans five thousand dollars and May Tabak one thousand dollars. The former seems to trigger an incurable tic in Mr. Kramer for reasons to which I am not privy. At the time of the panel's meeting, John Coplans's bibliography included written or edited books or catalogues-issued-as-books on Andy Warhol, Don Judd, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, and *Serial Imagery,* a spate of reviews from the West Coast for *Art News,* and articles in the customary art magazines on Peter Voulkos, Edward Kienholz, Kelly, Claes Oldenburg, Warhol, Judd, Lichtenstein, Robert Smithson, Mel Bochner, and the Norton Simon takeover of the Pasadena Museum of Art; all of this does not include his hardly "more than obscure" contribution to art criticism as one of the founders and as editor of *Artforum* magazine. Mr. Kramer is entitled to his aesthetic, literary, and political differences with John Coplans, but he is not entitled to conclude from them that it required a "rather liberal view of the critical vocation" to award him a fellowship in 1975. As for May Tabak, I cannot, after eight years, cite from memory from the dossier for her candidacy, but I would be willing to bet that there was enough in it to merit the small award of one thousand dollars, whose kind were intended only to enable the grantee to buy a little study, travel, and writing time. The 1981 awarding of another fellowship to John Coplans and the 1980 invitation to May Tabak to serve on a panel are, of course, the responsibilities of the 1981 panel and the 1980 panel selectors. That Ms. Baker, Ms. Lippard, and I were "recipients of fellowships in other years," cited, I presume, to imply corruption, is hardly surprising given the small number of serious practicing art critics (Ken Friedman's generous estimate of twenty-five hundred can be divided by the usual ten-to-one ratio of chimera to substance) and ten years of fellowships. In my case, I received my three thousand dollars two years before serving on the panel, which is not the way crooked payoffs customarily work. No outright malfeasances are, of course, attributed to the 1975 panel by Mr. Kramer; the effect of naming us at the end of that long, complicated paragraph only makes it seem so. But Mr. Kramer is good at "good writing," and he knows that fuzziness is as useful a rhetorical tool as clarity.

My overriding complaint with his essay is, however, that he would have one believe through style if not substance, that he was present at the NEA seminar not as an official and presumably paid participant but as some sort of Red Cross observer. Granted, Mr. Kramer was an effective participant; I remember his usual erudition, wit, and constructive criticism. What I do not remember is much of this "private club" stuff being said by him to anybody's face at the conference table, when he was supposed to be assisting the NEA by relieving himself of these burdens of conscience.

Peter Plagens
Durham, North Carolina

To the Editors:

Speaking for a wide variety of new readers, I thank you for Hilton Kramer's deeply informative essay, "Criticism Endowed," in your November issue. As a participant in the NEA conference he described and analyzed so perceptively, I stand corrected in my interpretation of what actually happened there. A number of my colleagues feel similarly abashed. I am told that the National Endowment for the Arts is holding up approval of the new, revised fellowships in critical writing for the same reason. As for your veteran readers, they are uniquely endowed by "Criticism Endowed" with a fair warning as to the societal dangers posed by this program.

A word about my misconceptions, so you can judge how far removed I was from the truth. I do not recall the seminar being prompted by John Beardsley's "highly specific" paper condemning the old art critics' fellowship program, terminated by budget cuts in 1981. I do recall participating in a discussion by the twelve-member

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Visual Arts Policy Panel in the fall of 1981 at the behest of the Endowment itself, which felt that both improved fiscal circumstances and the spurt in applications to the "last" critics' panel justified reconsideration. I also remember that the old program was soundly criticized by most of us because of its restrictive definition of "art criticism," which confined the program almost entirely to reviewing and to evaluative monographs, totally ignoring broad theoretical writing (which in this century has often been written by artists, poets, historians, etc., as well as by working "critics") and cultural journalism, not to say staff writers and critics employed by newspapers and general magazines. In September, 1982, the same panel voted to renew the program in an expanded, revised version (now called "Fellowships in Critical Writing") in 1984, a position later endorsed by the Endowment staff, the chairman, the National Council, and once more by the Policy Panel in 1983. Closely linked to this early proposal was another recommendation—that the NEA convene a two-day seminar for critics, artists, journalists, and curators from across the United States—to advise the staff, which now had to administer a new program, on key issues in art criticism, reportage, and theory, as well as on long-range policy beyond next year (when the grants were already scheduled—to repeat—to be revived).

Hilton Kramer alone saw through all this. He decided that we were in fact assembled not to advise but to decide on the immediate fate of the fellowships themselves. If he is right (and I have no doubt he is), the presence on the panel of engaged professionals—the cream of the trade, in effect—was indeed a case of conflicted interest, since no quality fellowship program could have ignored their merits (i.e., denied them fellowships) in the past. I assumed, along with virtually everyone else, that the proceedings might affect future policy but not the decision to renew the grants in 1984, which had already been made. Beardsley's paper—and four others—were ostensibly commissioned to inform these deliberations. If Kramer is wrong, the participants were the right choices, as the Endowment requires the advice of professionals engaged in the field, not of those who aren't. In fact, I found myself pleased to find so many fresh, non-East Coast faces around the table, including journalists and newspaper critics from Boston, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Seattle. Mr. Kramer makes no mention of their presence, relegating them—in his unique wisdom—to a passive secondary status. My recollection—doubtless deluded—is that they spoke frequently and contributed significantly to our conclusions.

Three more misconceptions, though I am only dipping into a wide array of striking insights, about which I hope to write at great length later in a *mea culpa* essay that will shame St. Augustine. The absence of a commitment to "clarity" was certainly unclear to me; or perhaps my hearing was struck dumb. Did "speaker after speaker" indeed deride the "notion that clarity might be a desirable attribute"? To me it seemed the reverse. Keyed by Mr. Beardsley's broad, ill-defined definition of "clarity" in his paper, I recall speaker after speaker recommending its virtue, indeed, waving it like the American flag at an Olympic ice hockey game. When I spoke "against" clarity, it was obviously not against the precious value of communicating thoughts to readers (among the journals to which I regularly contribute is *Newsweek,* which claims thirty million readers) but against the use of this term as an undiscriminating epithet. Obviously there are many stylistic approaches to "clarity," many kinds of audiences for art writing, from the broad, general reader to the intense, specialized, professional; it would be insane, or so I thought in my pre-Beardsley phase, to address the readers of *Artforum* with the same rhetorical strategy suited to *Newsweek* or *The New York Times. Mea culpa,* again. I suppose I was inhibited that day by my re-reading of *1984*—and Orwell's truly specific essays on the vulgarization of the English language—in which he lamented the obsession with simplification (a central characteristic of Newspeak) as well as with difficult and meaningless jargon, thus robbing language of its admirable ability to communicate difficult and innovative thoughts by means of metaphor, simile, and the compound-complex sentence. In the light of the Beardsley-Kramer addiction to "clarity" at all costs, even T. S. Eliot—one of Kramer's favorite poets, and mine—must be returned to the shelf.

Finally, I was blind as well to the "politics" that Kramer detected writhing beneath the entire proceedings, including my own paper, which I

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naïvely considered to be an historical analysis of the size and sophistication of the contemporary art audience, so different from the half-literate mobs that deluged the salons in Paris in the 1860s. What indeed is the ideology motivating the galaxy of artists, critics, and curators present on those fateful two days? Kramer gives us one clue when he makes yet another telling, extraordinary point: the recipients of grants under the critics' program are "publicly opposed to just about every policy of the United States government except the one that puts money in their own pockets or the pockets of . . . political associates." Granted Kramer's formidable journalistic reputation, I must accept this statement to be not only true but buttressed by certifiable evidence, perhaps of a statistical nature (no one who recalls the fate of the late senator from Wisconsin in the Fifties would hurl such charges again without proof). Granted, I reacted in disbelief at first. Though I never applied to the old program, I know some of these winners and am certain that at least three voted for Ronald Reagan in 1980. Further, *I* am not opposed to everything the Reagan administration does, even though I voted Democratic. But perhaps that is not enough. Perhaps Kramer is himself the perfect patriotic model, as he implies, lining up behind Human Rights and Aid for Dependent Children with the same enthusiasm he doubtless displays for the MX missile.

Enough. I am corrected and cleansed. The new, revised fellowships in critical writing—supported in the end by every single participant in the infamous seminar save Mr. Kramer (who missed the final session on the last day)—have been cancelled. Democracy prevails, once more, in Washington.

Douglas Davis
New York City

Hilton Kramer replies:

Readers of my article, "Criticism Endowed," may recall the passage in which I observed—about the critics who played key roles in determining the fate of the NEA Art Critics Fellowship program—that "there is nothing these critics dislike more than criticism of themselves." It isn't often that one has such an observation so promptly confirmed—and at such length! For this reason alone, we can be grateful for the letters of Messrs. Friedman, Plagens, and Davis. They nicely illustrate the attitudes and circumlocutions which these critics bring to a critical inquiry into their own views and positions. I should point out, however, that these letters are mild stuff compared to the intensity and arrogance with which John Beardsley's report on the history of the fellowship program was treated in the course of the September seminar. It is also worth recalling, especially since Messrs. Friedman, Plagens, and Davis seem to have forgotten the point, that Mr. Beardsley's evaluation of the fellowship program was commissioned by the Endowment, and that discussion of this evaluation was part of the seminar's agenda.

Mr. Friedman claims that my article "pointed to a conspiratorial atmosphere [in the seminar] that simply didn't exist." Alas, he is anything but a close reader. What I actually wrote was: "In fact the record suggests that the whole fellowship program functioned as a kind of private club to which a number of outside guests—always carefully selected on the basis of geography, race, and gender—were each year invited." Clearly a "private club" is not to be confused with a conspiracy, and in any case I was referring to the fellowship program as a whole and not to the deliberations of the seminar. I do not find anything in my article to suggest that these deliberations were conducted in "a conspiratorial atmosphere."

As for Mr. Friedman's "simple answer" on the number of art critics now at work in this country: The truth is, there is nothing at all "simple" about his "answer" to a question that he begged from the outset. If, as he claims, there really are twenty-five hundred writers at work in the field of art criticism, then (for some people) the case for a government program to meet their needs could be made much more salable than it would be, say, for an activity involving a mere two or three dozen writers (which I suspect is a figure nearer the truth). If Mr. Friedman doesn't understand the uses to which such statistical data are put in government agencies, then he should get out of the business of gathering statistics.

Mr. Plagens's "overriding complaint" about my article is "that he [Hilton Kramer] would have one believe . . . that he was present at the

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NEA seminar not as an official and presumably paid participant but as some sort of Red Cross observer." This is a very odd complaint. Nowhere in my article did I claim to be a nonparticipant. The seminar wasn't open to nonparticipating observers (other than employees of the NEA and the NEH). In the NEA's "Statement of Purpose of Criticism Seminar," we were all asked for "recommendations for how the Endowment should, or should not support critical writing about the arts," and in this respect I was on the same footing with everyone else who participated. But Mr. Plagens, like Mr. Davis, obviously preferred some recommendations to others.

Mr. Davis, too, apparently needs to be reminded that we were *invited* to make recommendations in this seminar. When he writes that "He [Hilton Kramer] decided that we were in fact assembled not to advise but to decide on the immediate fate of the fellowships themselves," he is simply throwing up a smoke screen. He knows very well that it was not within the mandate of the seminar to decide on the future of the fellowships. That mandate lies elsewhere—in the recommendations of the Chairman to the National Council on the Arts, and in his final decision.

Finally, a word on Mr. Davis's jiggery-pokery about the political aspects of the fellowship program. Mr. Davis seems to have suffered an amnesiac seizure about his own published views on such matters. Therefore let me recall the passage in his essay, "Artpolitics: Thoughts against the Prevailing Fantasies," in which he makes his position clear. (The essay is reprinted as the lead piece in Mr. Davis's book, *Artculture: Essays on the Post-Modern,* published by Harper & Row in 1977.) In this essay Mr. Davis undertook to attack Herbert Marcuse (of all people!) for attempting to separate the discussion of art from the discussion of politics. "In a metaphorical sense," Mr. Davis wrote, "he [Marcuse] keeps art and politics as two words . . . . I have argued that the two words are one, whether we like it or not, inseparable and inalienable, to be ignored or carelessly defined not merely at our personal peril, but at the peril of the work of art itself, which is sited inevitably in the world."

If Mr. Davis has recently disavowed this position, he has kept his disavowal a secret. But if he hasn't, then all his flummery about the MX missile, etc., is simply dishonest.

Heinrich von Kleist

To the Editors:
Martin Greenberg, who translated the selections in Kleist's *The Marquise of O— and Other Stories,* told me the other day that he had seen Arthur A. Cohen's article on Kleist in the December issue of *The New Criterion* ("The Sufferings of Heinrich von Kleist") and was pleased by the high praise Mr. Cohen gave his work, calling it "a splendid translation." Unfortunately, Mr. Cohen also added the fatal words "long out of print." Fatal, because quite untrue.

This edition of Kleist's work has been on the Ungar list for many years since we took it over from the original publisher. We issue it in both hardcover and paperback, and both are still in print. And the title story will be issued with Erich Rohmer's screenplay for *The Marquise of O—* this spring. So Kleist is still very much with us.

Ruth Selden
Vice President
Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.
New York City

Philosophy as/and/of literature

To the Editors:
Your readers may be glad to learn that "Philosophy as/and/of Literature" by Arthur C. Danto, which Roger Kimball discusses in his report on the annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association in your February issue, appears in its entirety in the spring issue of *Grand Street.*

Ben Sonnenberg
Editor, *Grand Street*
New York City

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